

Remember to Hate Me brightened



Chapter 1

July 1969

It was a scorching day amid a week's stretch of blistering heat. All the windows of the Snape home were thrown open and the one fan they owned was plugged in, whirring valiantly but ineffectively into the warm air.

Still Severus slipped his jacket over his head. The thick fabric draped over him like an oppressive hug. He rolled several inches back from the sleeves, exposing spindly fingers and wrist bones that strained against pale skin.

Dressed in the oversized coat and a stained pair of his pa's work denim, Severus marched out of his room and to the living room. His mother sat on the sofa darning socks, several rumpled gray pairs scattered before her on the coffee table. Her eyes lifted to Severus and a small smile tucked into the corner of her mouth.

"And where are you off to?" she asked. Her fingers moved in her lap without pause.

"Dunno," Severus answered. "Maybe the shops."

"That's a fine idea," Eileen said. "Why don't you go in my purse and get money for a root beer float?"

Severus shrugged noncommittally. He didn't take the money; she needed it more. Instead he crept a little closer and bent to place a quick kiss to her cheek. "Pa's still gone for the week, isn't he?"

Eileen hummed agreement, the good nature fading slightly from her features. Severus regretted asking and took off through the front door, before he said another wrong thing.

The walk to the shopping center was nearly unbearable in the heat. Severus debated removing the jacket with each step. At one point he convinced himself to roll up the sleeves further but promptly tugged them back down when he spotted the smattering of bruises and remembered.

A thick, callused hand curled around his forearm. Eileen weeping. The shattering of glass upon wooden floors. Being lifted by his arm, shaken, and tossed into the corner. His own crying joining his mother's and a harsh voice saying-

"I told you we shouldn't have come."

Severus looked up from his feet and flicked his eyes around until he spotted the source of the whining.

He'd come to stop by the park on the corner of Bolton and Henry. Severus played in it many times as a child but it had been some time since he'd last done so. At nine he was far too mature for such timewasters as swings and monkey bars.

Two boys stood in the mulched lot, one several inches taller than the other. They both sported thick black locks of hair, the taller boy's long enough to brush his shoulders. They wore funny-looking black dresses with long sleeves that brushed the backs of their golden brown hands. Severus thought they must be as overheated as he was.

The shorter boy, the whiner, piped up again. "Mummy said—"

“Mummy said,” the taller boy mocked and threw his head back in barking laughter. “You’re eight, Regulus, not four. Why don’t you act like it?”

“Why don’t you?” the boy, Regulus, snapped back and then, seeming to realize how poor of a comeback that was, he folded his arms across his chest and huffed. “At least I’m not obsessed with Muggles.”

Muggles? Severus tossed the word around in his brain but no memory caught. He’d never heard it before. What was a Muggle?

“I’m not obsessed,” the older brother said dismissively. He stood still, clearly unbothered by Regulus’s remark, and looked away.

Just in time, Severus ducked behind a nearby azalea bush. The boy’s gaze slid past the spot Severus stood only seconds before and then returned to his brother.

“There’s none out here anyway,” the boy said. Disappointment etched into each word. “Let’s go home, Reg.”

“What about my frog?” Regulus demanded and Severus peeked out from around the bush in time to see the older boy place a small silver and blue box in Regulus’s outstretched hand.

“Don’t tell Mum,” he said in a voice so low Severus could barely catch the words. “Or Dad or creature.”

“Won’t,” Regulus said as he opened the box and pulled out what appeared to be a piece of chocolate. He bit into it and then as he chewed he extracted something else from the box - just as small but flat and impossible to make out from Severus’s distance. “Ugh, I got Godric Gryffindor.”

The brothers shuffled off, tossing words between them that Severus could no longer catch.

“Muggles,” he whispered to himself so that he wouldn’t forget. “Gryffindor.”

Severus emerged from the bush. He turned back the way he came and hurried home.

That night Eileen boiled potatoes for dinner and served them plain. Severus would have complained, begged for ham as well or at least a dab of butter, but he needed Eileen in a good mood so he ate without protest.

Only once they were finished did Severus set down his fork and ask, “What’s a Muggle?”

The words came hesitantly. Six months earlier he’d asked about a different word after overhearing a conversation between two teenagers. She’d gone red and slapped the back of his head. He still didn’t know what a growler was.

He watched his mother go still, standing at the table with a dirty plate in each hand. She didn’t look angry like last time but it was possibly worse. She looked afraid.

“Where did you hear that?” she asked. Her voice trembled out of her and the forks on the plate began to clatter as her hands shook.

“Nowhere,” he tried. When she took a step closer, he admitted, “Some boys at the park.”

Her lips thinned. She turned from him and brought the dishes to the sink but didn’t wash them. She hovered there for several moments and then spoke. Severus inched closer to better hear her.

"A Muggle is a non-magical person." Severus was at her side now. She glanced over at him. "Not a witch or wizard."

"I don't understand," he said.

Eileen took his hand - hers wavered against his - and led him upstairs. They entered her bedroom together.

The room always felt lifeless to Severus. The walls were bare, the furniture a nondescript brown, and the bed was neatly made with sheets yellowed from his father's cigarette smoke. He was only allowed in there to fetch things as instructed, usually when Tobias was too drunk to manage the stairs, and he'd never been in there with his mother before.

He studied her colorless face as she dropped his hand and walked to her nightstand. She pulled out a shoebox and from inside she lifted a long slender box. He recognized it, and the necklace that laid inside when she flipped the lid off.

She pulled out the necklace, the insert it rested on, and lastly a thin piece of wood that had been tucked underneath the cardboard. She took the wood in her hand and then sat down on the bed, patting the spot the next to her.

"This is my wand," Eileen said. For the first time something besides fear glowed through her. She smiled down at the wand affectionately, something wistful in her soft eyes. "I use it to do magic, Severus, and I'm fairly certain you can do it too. I've noticed since you were a babe. You'd cry up a storm and a lightbulb would pop. I'd try to feed you vegetables and I wouldn't be able to get the spoon within an inch of your mouth. Tobias-"

She broke off then and the glow faded.

"He doesn't like magic," she said. "You must never speak of it in front of him."

"Show me some," Severus said. He ignored the warning. He already tried to speak as little as possible around his father. It wouldn't be a challenge to skip the topic.

Eileen hesitated for a moment then moved her hand and the wand within it. She said something too but the sounds were unfamiliar and he couldn't quite puzzle out what it was.

A stream of water splashed out of the wand and into Severus's face.

"Wow!" he exclaimed as he swiped his sleeve across his eyes.

"Sorry," Eileen said and with another movement of the wand she dried his skin and clothes. "My aim's a bit out of practice"

"Do more," Severus demanded and at her reproachful look quickly added, "Please, Ma."

That night Severus nestled into his bed, body still but mind spinning busily. Mum was a witch. He was a wizard. Pa was a Muggle. Severus would go to school when he was eleven - Hogwarts she'd called it - and the prospect was at once thrilling and terrifying.

Severus dreamed of magic.

The next day he walked to the park again and waited several hours. The sun was thankfully less punishing than the day before but Severus still soaked through his clothes before he admitted defeat.

He returned day after day, hoping to meet the other wizards. When he wasn't at the park, he was home with Eileen and she filled his head with tales of Hogwarts - the different houses, the professors, the flying lessons, the magical creatures.

"Those boys must have a pet," Severus said for the last one. "They said something about a creature."

"Maybe so." Eileen finished sweeping the last corner of the kitchen floor and Severus crouched down with the dustpan. She nudged the crumb pile into the pan as she spoke. "Most pets are owls, cats, or toads. It's not very common to have anything else. Many creatures are restricted or banned."

A bang came from the front of the house and Severus startled so badly that he shook half the dust out of the pan. He bent back down and Eileen hurriedly swept it up again as Tobias thudded into the room.

He carried a plastic cooler and an insulated thermos, both coated in a week's worth of grime. He dropped them into the sink and then turned to his wife and son.

Tobias cut a short figure. A black moustache lined his thin upper lip and his thinning hair was cropped short. Sweat soaked his hairline. Lean muscles filled out his forearms where they poked out from plaid sleeves. A scowl curled into sunburned features as he asked, "What's for dinner?"

"Fish," Eileen said hesitantly.

Tobias grunted. "Don't like fish." He turned his wrist to look at the watch strapped there by a nearly-shredded band. "I'll eat something at the pub."

He stomped upstairs. By the time he came back downstairs showered and dressed in clean clothes, Severus and Eileen had moved on to wiping the windows. Eileen sprayed the solution onto the glass and Severus wiped it away with a rag.

Tobias watched them for a moment and then left without another word. The tension coiled through Severus relaxed, if only a little. Eileen seemed to feel the same for she paused in spraying to smile at him.

"I'm babysitting the Klein children tomorrow," she said. "We should have change to spare. Want to get an ice cream?"

Severus and Eileen walked to the shops together, chatting about this and that. He enjoyed not wearing the oppressive jacket - the bruises had faded well enough that he didn't have to. A summer breeze ghosted comfortably over his exposed arms and he wished he'd never have to cover up again.

They shared a single scoop chocolate cone, window shopped for a while, and then headed home. Eileen made fish and left a plate of leftovers on the counter.

In bed, Severus stayed awake listening for his pa's return. The pub could put him in a jovial mood or a terribly foul one and that mood usually extended into the next day.

Tobias slammed the door when he got home and that was all Severus needed to know.

He didn't sleep that night. He crawled out of bed at dawn. He toasted a few slices of bread and carried them out of the house. It was a slight risk to leave without permission but usually his absence only made Tobias happier.

The sun seemed to have finally tired out. The morning was muggy but overcast. Severus munched his toast as he walked and tried not to think about what might await him when he returned home.

He travelled to the park out of habit and settled down behind some bushes by the swings as he finished his breakfast. Once he was done he found a twig fallen underneath a tree and brought that behind the bush as well. He crouched down and swung the stick, spouting gibberish in his best mimic of Eileen casting a spell.

He spent hours there, moving from casting spells to scratching doodles in the dirt and then to laying back and picking out shapes in the clouds.

He was debating with himself whether or not to give in to his rumbling stomach and head home when he heard the voices. He peered over the top of the bush and quickly ducked back down, heart hammering. It wasn't the wizarding brothers he'd been looking for but three of his yearmates. The tall one had dunked Severus's head into the toilet after he answered a question correctly in class. Severus hadn't raised his hand since.

He hurriedly crawled under the bush and spent an hour listening to the boys' drivel. He entertained himself by trying to count all the leaves above him. Once their voices faded and then disappeared altogether, he rolled out and stood up. His eyes snapped immediately onto the boy that stood silently on the playground. It was the taller wizard, the older brother, and Severus might have grinned if he wasn't so tired, hungry, and nervous.

"Why were you down there?" the boy asked. Severus shrugged.

"Sirius?" came a breathless call. Regulus, as Severus remembered he was named, came running around the street corner. He looked from his brother to Severus and flushed an angry red. "Sirius, let's go, you can't talk to one of *them*." His lip curled on the last word and he looked at Severus with unconcealed distaste.

"I'm not a Muggle," Severus blurted before he could consider the wisdom of admitting such. Both brothers turned to stare at him.

"You're not?" Sirius asked, eyes flicking over Severus skeptically. "Why are you dressed so funny then?"

"Me?" Severus cried. Shame curled through him. Everyone made fun of his clothes. He'd hoped it would be different with wizards. "What are *you* wearing?"

Sirius glanced down. He wore the same long black dress as before. Leaves and dirt clung to where the fabric dragged across the ground.

"Robes," Sirius answered without a hint of embarrassment. "Don't you wear them?"

Severus shrugged again. He'd been so determined to speak to the brothers and now it was going all wrong.

"I'm going home," the younger brother announced. "And I won't lie if Mummy asks where you are."

"Go on then," Sirius said disinterestedly and rolled his eyes toward Severus as though to say, *Little brothers, am I right?*

Regulus flounced off and for a moment Sirius and Severus looked at each other in silence. Severus thought of his own funny clothes and severely cropped hair and sickly paleness. *At least I'm not*

wearing a dress, he thought, miserably and somewhat desperately.

“Who are your parents?” Sirius asked.

“Stop asking me questions,” Severus snapped and edged back. He should walk away, he knew that, but an insatiable curiosity stilled his feet.

“What’s your name?” Sirius tossed back but with an easy grin that contradicted his tone. “How old are you?”

“You’re a freak,” Severus muttered.

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not!” Sirius extended one hand and squinted so hard his umber eyes nearly disappeared beneath their lids. A tiny green sprout rose from the center of his palm and unfurled yellow petals. “Would a freak do that?”

“Absolutely,” Severus said and felt a slap of delight when Sirius barked a genuine laugh at his answer. No one had ever found him funny before. He hadn’t even been trying.

“Fair point,” Sirius said and crushed the flower within a fist. “I’m Sirius Black.”

“Severus,” was all he said.

“Our names kind of match,” Sirius said. “I’m named after a star, what about you?”

An hour later they sat cross-legged in the mulch, chattering easily back and forth. When Severus revealed that he went to Muggle school, Sirius exploded in questions. He took in Severus’s mundane answers with rapt attention and Severus found he liked being the center of positive attention very much.

“My mum will have my head,” Sirius said morosely when he noticed the pink and purple streaks in the sky. “I wasn’t supposed to leave at all and I’ve been gone hours.”

Severus hummed sympathetically. He hoped Tobias might already be off to the pub again by the time he returned.

“Can you meet same day next week?” Sirius asked. “I’ll find a way to sneak out again. I always do.” Severus agreed and tried not to look too eager about it.

Tobias wasn’t at the pub. He lounged on the sofa, beer in hand, when Severus slipped through the front door. Eileen poked her head out from the kitchen and smiled at him.

“Wash up for supper,” she instructed.

“No need,” Tobias said roughly. “If he’s old enough to spend all day out without permission, then he’s old enough to find his own food.”

When Severus laid in bed and couldn’t sleep from the hunger prowling his insides, he thought of the flower in Sirius’s hand and the water his mother splashed onto his face. Magic was real and once he was eleven he’d have a wand and a school. He wouldn’t have to go to bed without food at Hogwarts, he was sure of that.

Chapter 2

October 1969

Severus scuffed his toe into the mulch as Sirius dug through his pockets. “It’s okay if you don’t have it,” Severus said.

“I do have it,” Sirius insisted. “I told you I nicked it from one of Father’s friends. You don’t believe me?” He paused in his search and looked up to meet Severus’s gaze defiantly. “Why would I lie?”

“You lied about flobberworms tasting like candy,” Severus said with a disgusted grimace. “And about the Apparition dance and-”

“Those were *pranks*,” Sirius interrupted impatiently, hands roving once more. “They were *funny*.”

“To who?” Severus muttered and shook a few slivers of mulch off the top of his shoe.

“Ha!” Sirius cried triumphantly and lifted a worn scrap of yellow paper. He passed it over to Severus who held it warily as though it might burst into flame at any moment. “Just read that, will you?”

Severus did. *12 Grimmauld Place* scrawled across the scrap of paper in curling handwriting. They had passed enough notes by now, stuck in a link on the swing’s chain or taped to the top of the slide, that Severus knew the handwriting wasn’t Sirius’s.

“Now think about that address and follow me.” Sirius grinned mischievously - did he ever any other way? - and took off down the street Severus knew led to his home.

Sirius tried once to explain why Severus couldn’t see his house but his jaw only moved soundlessly, the words trapped in his throat. There was still a lot about magic Severus didn’t understand.

He followed Sirius with the address rattling around in his brain. Each street they passed grew more resplendent until they turned down a corner to pass towering facades and immaculate lawns.

“You live here?” Severus murmured. He remembered the time he’d brought Sirius to his house to meet Eileen when Tobias was off working. He hadn’t been proud of his home then but seeing where Sirius lived, a deep and unshakeable shame burned through him.

“Mm,” Sirius grunted and nodded at an expansive empty stretch of neatly cut grass. “Concentrate on the address.”

Severus concentrated so hard that his eyes shut and his tongue poked out. He held his breath, too, and only when his lungs burned did his eyes fly open as he sucked in a gasp of air.

Where there had once been an empty lawn was now a multi-level stone home with dozens of windows and a giant arched doorway.

“You live here?” Severus repeated. “In a castle?” His eyes flicked from the home to Sirius. “Are you secretly a prince?”

Sirius laughed as he always did, loud and easy and unselfconscious. “Course,” Sirius said. He

started up the block paved driveway and Severus lagged behind, still taking in the immense building before him. “Prince Sirius of the Royal House of Black. Doesn’t sound too bad, does it? Bet I could stick Regulus in the stocks if I was a prince.”

“He’d be a prince too,” Severus pointed out.

“He’d be the spare.” Sirius pushed open the massive front door and poked his head inside. After a moment he lifted a hand and waved Severus inside.

They slipped quietly up a grand staircase, down a corridor where even their soft steps echoed, and into Sirius’s bedroom.

Severus worked to keep his face impassive as he took in the room. Sirius’s bed was larger than Severus’s entire bedroom and piled high with thick blankets and squishy pillows. His bed frame matched his nightstand and dresser and they were all free of nicks, stains, and dust.

Severus stepped up to a writing desk placed against one wall. It was scattered with paper and feathers - *parchment and quills*, he corrected himself. There were a few framed moving pictures on the desk. One showed a considerably younger Sirius hoisting a toddler Regulus into his arms while his parents looked on with vaguely concerned smiles.

“Here,” Sirius said and thrust his hand out so that what he was holding came dangerously close to Severus’s nose. Severus reached up and took the wand offered to him.

Eileen never allowed Severus to handle her wand so this was his first time touching one. It was, Sirius explained, a spare from a dead relative that he’d stolen years earlier during the viewing. It felt a bit warmer and lighter than a stick of the same size would have but a little disappointment trickled in when nothing happened.

“You were hoping for sparks,” Sirius said, correctly reading Severus’s expression. “Or water or flowers. You know you need spells for that.”

“I know,” Severus said. “But what if I’m not magic?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Always with the pessimism. Look, give it here.”

Severus complied and watched as Sirius swished the wand with a clearly enunciated, “Lumos.”

An orb of light flicked on at the end of the wand.

“Nox.” And went out.

“Let me try,” Severus said and held out his hand.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” Sirius said, ignoring him. The pillow he’d pointed his wand at drifted upward and rotated slowly above the bed.

“I want a turn,” Severus insisted.

Sirius aimed his wand at Severus next. He tried to turn away but even as he moved Sirius called out, “Obscuro!” and darkness fell.

Darkness. Cool sheets against his bare chest. A creaking door. Fingers tight on his arm. Warm boozy breath across his face. “Lazy, good-for-nothing-”

Severus reached up and his fingers scrabbled against the blindfold. In only a few seconds he’d

ripped it off. He glowered at Sirius who only grinned back. He tried to be inconspicuous as he wiped his suddenly clammy palms on his thighs.

“That’s a second year spell,” Sirius said smugly.

“I’m going home,” Severus snapped back.

“Wait!” Sirius was maddeningly agile and Severus had barely taken one step toward the door when Sirius’s hand closed on his arm. Severus shook the grip off and glared at his friend. “Was just having a laugh, don’t get your knickers in a twist. Here.” Sirius tossed the wand and Severus reached out for it but fumbled. His cheeks burned as he bent and scooped the wand off the floor.

“Teach me the light spell,” he said as he willed his face to return to its normal color.

“I said I would, didn’t I?” Sirius settled on top of his bed and Severus followed suit. “Try out the spell for yourself first and I’ll help you adjust based on that.”

Severus lifted the wand and said, hesitantly, “Lumos.”

An orb even brighter than Sirius’s glowed at the tip of the wand. They grinned at each other through the light of the spell.

“Brilliant,” Sirius said with unreserved admiration. “Now put it out.”

Severus did so easily.

They spent the better part of the next two hours selecting new spells to practice from Sirius’s mum’s old textbook. They body-binded each other, falling over onto piles of pillows, and repeatedly locked and unlocked the bedroom door. Eventually Severus started to develop a pulsing headache so they called it quits.

“Hogwarts is going to be fantastic,” Sirius declared. He lounged back on his bed, slowly rotating his hands. The mouse he’d Transfigured from a matchbox scampered back and forth across his knuckles. Severus watched a little resentfully. All he’d managed with his matchbox was to change the cardboard to a slightly grayer shade.

“Think I’ll get into Slytherin with you?” Severus asked.

“Course,” Sirius said. His hands stilled and the mouse jumped down. It slipped off the edge of the bed and disappeared. “Your mum was in it, wasn’t she? My whole family’s been in. Must be genetic.”

“Hmm.” Severus pulled the closest throw pillow into his lap and began to pick at the tiny start of a loose thread. “What if I don’t get a letter at all?”

“With that magic?” Sirius snatched the pillow from Severus and thumped the other boy on the head. “Don’t be an idiot. You make me wonder what my parents are so fussed about.”

“Me?” Severus asked. “They haven’t even met me.”

“Not you, but your kind.” Sirius passed the pillow back over. “Mudbloods.”

Muggleborns Eileen had called them - him - but Sirius always said this other word. Severus didn’t like it. It knotted threads of shame and anger inside him.

“They say Mudbloods are no good,” Sirius went on obliviously. “But you’re better than me in most

of this stuff and I'm great."

Severus glowed under the compliment and tried not to worry about how everyone else at Hogwarts would react to him.

March 1970

Severus laid in bed and stared at the open window. The night was unseasonably cold, below freezing, and a frigid wind blew in but still Severus didn't get up to shut it. Partly he lacked the energy to force his body from its warm confines. Mostly he hoped the visitor he wanted would finally show.

He dozed off at some point and woke to icy fingers gripping his arm and shaking it gently. Severus opened his eyes to find Sirius staring down at him.

"You came," Severus said gratefully and pushed himself up to lean against the headboard. He was pleased he managed to wince only a little.

Sirius's eyes were dark and still as they searched Severus's. His normally cheery expression was flat and cold.

"I couldn't leave a note," Severus rushed to explain. "If anybody saw me like this - I'm sorry, I know we had plans - I figured-"

"Shut up," Sirius said roughly and turned on his heel. He disappeared back out the window. Severus waited patiently.

Sirius returned a half hour later clutching a small jar. He dropped onto the bed next to Severus and unscrewed the lid. Then he dipped his fingers into the green gel and lifted his hand to Severus's face.

Severus sat still as Sirius rubbed the salve into the cut on his lip and the bruise around his eye. The pain slipped away and for the first time in days Severus relaxed.

Sirius repeated the process on Severus's arms and back, crisscrossed with welts. "I'll leave the jar," Sirius said. "Every twelve hours."

"I know," Severus said, more snippy than he intended. He was grateful for the healing salve and Sirius's steady hands as he applied it; Severus was always too stiff and sore for the first treatment. Sirius had seen him in this manner before and knew all about Tobias. Still Severus felt embarrassed and defensive and it came out in his tone.

If Sirius cared about Severus snapping, he didn't show it. "What was it this time?"

"No idea." Severus watched as Sirius replaced the top and crossed the room to set the jar on the windowsill. Severus's room didn't have any furniture aside from the mattress which sat on the floor. "He's always angry."

"I mean, how did he do it?"

"You always ask me that," Severus complained.

"I'm keeping a list," Sirius said and tapped his head with one long finger. "One day I'll do

everything to him that he's done to you."

Severus closed his eyes and his mind replayed the night's events. Tobias stumbling in, so drunk that his words were barely coherent. Shoving Eileen away when she hurried to him and grabbing Severus by the arm. Dragging him upstairs while Severus pleaded to be left alone.

Severus reached up and traced a finger over his lip. The cut no longer stung at his touch.

"A belt," Severus said quietly. He opened his eyes in time to catch Sirius mouthing the same words, committing them to memory.

November 1970

Severus arrived at the park first and settled next to the azalea bush he'd once hidden behind. Sirius sprinted up shortly after, clutching a furled sheet of parchment in one raised fist.

"You got it," Severus said as Sirius crouched and smoothed the letter flat onto the pavement. They peered at it together. Severus enviously read the words inviting Sirius to Hogwarts.

"Mum already ordered all the stuff by post," Sirius said. A pinch of sourness diluted his cheer.
"Said she doesn't want me meeting *the wrong sort* at Diagon Alley."

"Little does she know you already met me," Severus said. Sirius's grin returned full force.

"I can't wait to see her face at the station," he said. Fully cheered by their plan to reveal their friendship at King's Cross, he scooped his letter back up and stuffed it in his robes. Severus still wasn't sure where the pockets were on those things.

"You'll wear Muggle clothes to the station, won't you?"

"Have to," Sirius answered. "My parents hate it, of course. They think we should be able to Apparate or floo somewhere, avoid the Muggles at the station entirely."

Severus hesitated before asking, "What if I don't get my letter?"

"You've asked that before," Sirius said. "You will."

"What if I don't?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Sirius!" Severus's voice was sharp and biting. "What if I don't?"

For once, Sirius didn't come back with a quick answer. He stared at Severus thoughtfully, for so long that Severus looked away.

"I'll come back over the summer and teach you everything I learned," Sirius eventually said.

"You'd forget about me," Severus said. "With all your wizard friends. I'll be boring."

"You're boring now." Sirius stuck his tongue out. "Want to go to the river?"

"Alright," Severus said and climbed to his feet. Sirius skipped rocks while Severus collected beetles from the mud. He tried to enjoy the nice weather and Sirius's company but inwardly he dwelled on the terrible possibility that he'd be left behind.

Chapter 3

September 1971 - First Year

Severus pressed against his mother as he took in the bustling station. It was by far the busiest, loudest place he'd ever been. Muggles streamed past and among them Severus was sure he could spot a wizard or two by their clothes - one man wore a brightly colored button down shirt with pajama pants, another a fuzzy brown crop top over ski pants.

"I'm so proud of you," Eileen murmured when they paused after strolling through the brick wall onto the Hogwarts Express platform. Severus looked from her warm, familiar eyes to the scarlet engine spitting smoke.

"You'll be alright?" Severus asked and his eyes flickered down to her arms, covered in long sleeves despite the muggy summer heat.

"Of course I will," Eileen said and pulled Severus into a hug. "Don't worry about me. Send me owls - the school will have some or see if Sirius will let you use his."

As if summoned, Sirius popped through the wall. He skimmed a look over the train and then bounced his focus to Severus. He grinned and hurried to close the distance between them, wheeling a large chest and his caged owl behind him.

"Mum and Dad are right behind me," Sirius said cheerfully. "They're going to have a fit."

A petite woman with a long plait stepped onto the platform. She was followed by a man that towered over them all. He kept his arm around Regulus's shoulder protectively as they surveyed the station. They all wore formal, uncomfortable-looking clothing which, to an uninformed observer, could explain the matching pinched expressions on their faces as they looked around. Severus knew better though.

"Walburga, is that you?" Eileen asked as the three Blacks approached. "It's been years."

"Since you married a Muggle," Walburga said flatly. Her dark eyes barely glanced at Eileen before turning sharply to Sirius. "Why are you talking to them? Let's go."

"We're sitting together on the train," Sirius said, suddenly very smug. "You know, Severus lives in Spinner's End."

"Does he now?" Orion squinted at his son. "Is that where you've been going all this time? You're spending time with a Mudblood?"

Severus held back a flinch at the word and the obvious contempt it carried. He glanced up at his mother. Eileen's cheeks flushed a mottled red.

"Really!" Eileen drew Severus closer to her. "How dare you-"

"Come along," Walburga commanded to Sirius. "Or we'll take that owl back and snap your broomstick the moment we get home."

Sirius made a face but trailed after his mother. Eileen watched them go, still red faced, lips pressed together in a rare show of anger.

Severus reached out and gently took from Eileen the paper grocery bag containing his school supplies: two sets of used robes, outdated editions of his textbooks, and a single quill. They'd gone shopping at a secondhand shop in Diagon Alley and then Eileen sewed a small pocket onto the inside sleeve of each robe, saying it was the fashion when she was in school. Severus's wand was tucked inside one of the robes where it laid folded in the bag.

Eileen looked down at him and in only a few moments seemed to shake off the encounter with the Black family.

"Be good now," she whispered into the top of his head as she hugged him tightly. "Find the people and things you enjoy. Don't let the bullies get to you." She drew back and bit her lip before adding, "Write me, like I said, but maybe not too often. Tobias won't like the birds swooping around."

Severus decided then that he would never owl his mother.

He climbed onto the train, clutching his bag to his chest, and set off to find Sirius. He peered into several cars worth of compartments before he located him.

He slid the door open and only noticed as two heads turned that Sirius wasn't alone. He felt the urge to apologize for his presence but bit it back. Instead he sat down stiffly in the seat next to Sirius without a word.

"Sorry about my parents," Sirius said with an exaggerated eye roll. "I told you they're horrible."

"What'd they do?" the other boy asked with cheerful interest. His brown skin was a darker shade than Sirius's and tightly coiled hair bounced around his head. He wore a pair of round wire glasses and he'd already changed into his robes. He looked completely at ease in them.

"They hate Muggles," Sirius said. "So did I, before I met Severus." He said this unflinchingly, as easily as if he was discussing the weather.

"You'll be Slytherin then," the bespectacled boy said. His tone went frosty; he looked at Sirius with much less warmth than moments earlier.

"What about you?" Sirius asked.

"Gryffindor," the boy shot back with a note of challenge.

"Oh." Sirius's disappointment filled the compartment near tangibly. Eileen and Sirius had filled Severus in on the everlasting rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor; Severus remembered Regulus's disappointment at his Godric chocolate frog card.

Sirius and the boy looked at each other for a while longer, communicating something wordlessly that Severus couldn't quite pick up.

Then the boy slipped a deck of cards out of his robe and held it up. "Exploding Snap?"

Sirius tried a few times to convince Severus to play but eventually he was left alone to curl up in his seat and stare out the window. The conversation flowed easily between Sirius and, as he introduced himself, James. Severus listened with a pit of envy weighing heavy in his gut.

"-all Purebloods go to Slytherin, my Dad said, but do you reckon-"

"-I thought she was a Muggle, she lives down the street from me and she has this ghastly sister, Petunia-"

“-Kreacher had no choice but to light it on fire. Mum was furious-”

“-going to play on the Gryffindor team next year, already bought a Cleansweep-”

“-family in India, we visit every summer. Regulus has a thing for our cousin, I swear-”

They chattered as Sirius and Severus changed into their robes, through the process of disembarking the train, and during the boat ride across a vast lake. It was only when they clambered up a set of stairs and arrived before a severe looking woman that they fell silent.

She introduced herself as Professor McGonagall and escorted them through a giant set of doors. Severus’s worn boots thudded over the stone floor and he tilted his head back to take in the hovering candles and night sky. He’d read enough books and practiced enough spells to guess it was a Charm - he’d have to check Hogwarts: A History and see if they explained it there.

Below the enchanted view lay five tables, four full of students and one at which the apparent staff was seated. Severus looked carefully away from the hundreds of curious eyes and focused on the small step stool Professor McGonagall ushered them toward. The Sorting Hat perched on it, tattered and threadbare, and Severus felt a twitch of anxiety knowing he was about to be sorted before so many people.

He hid his hands inside his robes and crossed his fingers on both hands. *Please let me go to Slytherin.*

There were only two students called to the stool before, “Black, Sirius,” rung out in Professor McGonagall’s amplified voice.

Sirius nudged his way through the crowd, eyes roaming the older students as a careless grin danced across his face. He slapped the hat upon his head and settled onto the stool. Within moments the grin became a bit fixed, faded, and then -

“GRYFFINDOR,” the hat shouted and Sirius ripped it off his head. He looked at Severus for only a moment, long enough to flash a confused grimace his way, and then ambled off to the politely clapping sea of scarlet and gold.

Sirius in Gryffindor? But he’d said - Eileen said -

The rest of the sorting slipped past Severus as he puzzled over Sirius’s placement. His own name cut through the distressed reflection. He jolted to attention and realized only three other students stood beside him. He glanced at Sirius and something inside him twisted unpleasantly when he saw James from the train perched on the same bench.

“Quite difficult to read,” the hat murmured in his ear. “Like looking through a dirty window, I’d say.”

Sirius in Gryffindor? It made no sense. It wasn’t fair.

“I feel something unresolved about you,” the hat continued. “Perhaps you have something to prove.”

A beat. Severus didn’t know if he should answer. He didn’t.

“SLYTHERIN,” the hat announced just as Severus wanted for the past two years. He slipped the hat off and replaced it on the stool before making his way to his new table.

He took a seat on the first empty bench he found. The faces that looked at him were not unfriendly like his former Muggle classmates but smooth, unaffected, with maybe the mildest tinge of suspicion.

The sorting finished and the plates around them filled with food. Severus took a slice of toast and peeled the crust off slowly. He'd had only potatoes for the past week - boiled, roasted, mashed. He didn't think his stomach could handle anything richer.

Plus, when his gaze bounced to Gryffindor table, he spied Sirius and James laughing together. Any appetite he might have had vanished.

"Severus Snape, was it?" A tall thin boy with long blond hair approached Severus as pudding cleared away and peered down at him with unconcealed distaste. "I'm Lucius Malfoy. I'm the Slytherin Head Boy. Those—" he pointed to a squat girl with a frizzy bun and a lanky boy with bundled braids, "-are your Prefects. If you have any questions or...issues, you are to find one of us."

Malfoy paused and swept his eyes over Severus. His sneer deepened. "Never heard your surname. My friends haven't either. Are you, ah, Muggleborn?"

"No," Severus said. "My father was homeschooled." He hadn't planned the lie but it came easily and he noted with some relief that Lucius's disdain lessened at his answer.

"I see," Lucius said and then turned to address the table at large. "First years, follow the Prefects now." He pointed at the Prefects again.

As the first years clustered around the Prefects, the boy smiled at them while the girl cast them blatantly appraising looks.

"Bad lot," she said disappointedly. "Except for you two." She pointed first at a boy with strawlike blond hair and then at a girl who wore a scarf that emerged seamlessly from her robe to wrap around her hair. "Rosier and Shafiq, isn't it?"

"You must be Bellatrix Black," the girl said and she sounded both pleased and cautious. "I'm Kamila." Severus looked at Bellatrix with interest. He'd heard stories about her from Sirius, never very nice ones. For cousins, they didn't look much alike.

"Pleasure," Bellatrix said as gruffly as if she'd spat a curse word. Kamila's face dropped in confusion. None of the other first years spoke. "Let's get going."

Severus followed the Prefects and his housemates down the corridors of Hogwarts with a snarled, sinking feeling that nothing was going to turn out the way he'd imagined.

December 1971

"Excellent!" Professor Slughorn cried, peering into Lily Evans's cauldron. "Marvelous, my girl. Five points to Gryffindor." She flushed under the compliment and nervously reached up to tuck her hair behind her ears. Once he continued on to the next student, she lifted a phial and began to transfer her sample.

"Satisfactory," was the pronouncement for Evan Rosier and, "Dear me, did you forget the fourth sprig of lavender?" for Achilles Mulciber.

Sirius and James each received a pat on the shoulder for their shimmering cauldrons and then Professor Slughorn came to stop at Severus's desk.

"Where is your Sleeping Draught?" he asked as he looked between Severus's flat expression and the empty cauldron.

"Seeing as last week Potter and Black tampered with my Wiggenweld Potion, I thought I'd better not bother."

Severus caught the grin the two boys shared.

"Oh come now, Severus. We discussed this! There's no shame in your adding too much Boom Berry juice. No need to blame others. We all mistakes, especially in our first year."

"I don't."

Professor Slughorn gawked at him. To his left Marceline Blanchet snorted laughter into her Slytherin scarf.

"Well," Professor Slughorn rallied, "that's a zero for today, you do realize?"

Severus didn't answer. After a few uncertain moments, Professor Slughorn wheeled away to Peter Pettigrew's potion. Thick sludge coated the cauldron yet Slughorn awarded Pettigrew five points for effort.

"Effort!" Marceline groused fifteen minutes later as she walked beside Severus on their way to Transfiguration. "My potion was far superior to Petty's, where's my points for effort? As Head of Slytherin, shouldn't he be at least *attempting* to help us win the House Cup?"

Marceline continued on her rant and Severus half-listened, humming and nodding when he thought it was expected of him. They settled at a table next to a group of Ravenclaws and she ended her expression of dissatisfaction with, "And we're going to win the Quidditch Cup if I have anything to do with it!"

"Do you?" Severus asked. "Have anything to do with it?"

"Well, not yet, but I saw this curse in-"

"Quiet now." Professor McGonagall stood before her desk and stared each talking student down into silence. When she caught Marceline's eyes, the girl mimed locking her lips and tossing the key over her shoulder. Professor McGonagall's mouth twitched. "We'll be working on matchboxes again today..."

Severus zoned out. When he'd tackled the first (and second and part of third) year curriculum with Sirius he hadn't predicted how mind numbing it would make their future courses.

When they were dismissed to work, Severus withdrew his wand. Marceline watched him impatiently. He tapped the matchbox and raised his hand.

Professor McGonagall quickly came to stand in front of his desk. "Perfectly done on the first try once again, Mr. Snape." She sounded both approving and wary. "Ten points to Slytherin." She Transfigured the mouse back into a matchbox. "You can use the rest of the hour to work on the essay I assigned last week."

Severus pulled out the parchment that contained his completed essay and posed with his quill above it, pretending to work. Marceline lost interest in his show and turned to her own matchbox, eyebrows knitted together in concentration as she prodded it with her wand.

While his hand mimed scribbling, his mind wandered. Ever since the Sorting Ceremony he'd been researching spells to mimic the enchanted ceiling. Hogwarts: A History wasn't especially helpful and the more Severus read, the more clear it became that it was a complicated array of charms rather than a singular one.

Not that it deterred him. Severus had bet Gerald Avery a Galleon that they'd have an enchanted window in the dorm room by the end of the year. As Severus didn't have even a Knut, it was a bet he intended to win.

Severus passed the rest of the day as he had each one since September - completing his work efficiently and quietly with Marceline at his side. She'd latched onto him the first week and he'd yet to discover a reason to shake her off.

"Treacle Tart again?" Marceline poked the pudding with her fork. "Can't the elves bake anything else?"

"There were pumpkin muffins last night," Kamila said. "Only you fell asleep before dinner."

"Flying lessons are *exhausting!*"

Severus looked up from his own half-eaten slice and, rather intentionally, caught a pair of dark brown eyes staring at him. A ghost of a smile touched Sirius's lips as he quirked his eyebrows. Severus nodded as imperceptibly as he could manage.

Severus slipped away from the Slytherins in the after-dinner crowd. He walked the familiar path to a deserted classroom on the second floor and settled into his customary spot atop a disused rolling leather chair.

"I still say it's no fair you get to sit there," was Sirius's hello as he pushed the door open. He brushed dust off a small plastic chair and fell back into it. "I'm taller, you know. My legs need more room."

"Taller for now," Severus said although he knew perfectly well that the odds were not in his favor.

"Did you listen to the Cannons match last week?" Sirius pulled out a glossy magazine and flipped to a page splashed with players decked in bright orange. He held it out and Severus took it, watching for a few moments as the wizards and witches blurred in and out of the picture.

"I've never listened to a match, why would I start now?" Severus tried to hand the magazine back but Sirius shook his head.

"Keep it," Sirius said. "You need to do your research."

He began to dig through his pockets once more. This time he pulled out two slightly squished cauldron cakes. He passed one over to Severus. "Since we didn't get to celebrate my birthday," Sirius explained at Severus's questioning look.

Severus looked from the magazine to the cake and then shoved both at Sirius.

"I don't want these."

Sirius paused in unwrapping his cake. "Why not?"

"Don't tell me you've already forgotten."

"James wanted to do it," Sirius said instantly, without an ounce of guilt. "It was for my birthday."

"Putting itching powder down my robes was your present?"

Sirius sighed. "It wasn't *your* robes, it was all *Slytherins'* robes. I can't believe you want to argue about this again." He took a bite of his cake and spoke thickly around it as he chewed. "You know, 'snot my fault you're in Slytherin. You could have asked the hat like I did."

Severus ground his teeth together and said nothing. They'd had this same conversation half a dozen times and it never went anywhere. He still remembered the physical shock that went through him the first time Sirius bragged about asking to go to Gryffindor. All Severus heard was that Sirius picked James after only knowing him a few hours.

Ever since, the two boys moved through the school causing mayhem. The first time Sirius received a Howler for one of his stunts he'd listened to his dad's hoarse yelling with a stunned, downcast face. Each one thereafter elicited increasingly sillier responses. After the itching powder prank, he'd Conjured a top hat and pretended to tap dance to his mum's reprimands.

"You have to admit it was an impressive bit of magic." Sirius finished his cake and reached for the one Severus rejected. "You know Remus Lupin?"

"No," Severus said, though he did. He was the only other boy that used secondhand things and even before the weather chilled he'd never gone a day without long sleeves. Of course Severus noticed him.

"Yes you do. He helped us out, found a charm-replicating spell. So when we—"

"I don't care," Severus interrupted.

Sirius huffed, crossing his arms. "Why did you meet me then?"

"I don't know," Severus said, sullen, and then felt a flash of fear at the idea of Sirius ending their friendship. He hastily added, "Let's talk about something else. Who did the Cannons play against?"

Sirius seized on the subject and happily blathered away about Quidditch until the time-minding charm they'd cast beeped to alert them that curfew approached.

"One more thing," Sirius said as they stepped out into the corridor. "You aren't going home for holidays, are you?" Severus shook his head. "Didn't think so. Happy Christmas then." Sirius tossed something soft at Severus who fumbled and dropped it. By the time he straightened up clutching the package, Sirius had disappeared through a nearby portrait.

Severus, dreading another prank and not wishing to be questioned by the other Slytherins, tore off the brown paper on the spot. Inside laid a brand new set of winter robes, a pair of fur-lined gloves, and woolen socks.

He would have been mortified to receive such a gift from anyone else. Was it that obvious to everyone that even in the snow he still wore the same set of thin robes Eileen purchased and patched up over the summer? A stab of embarrassment did go through him but as they were from Sirius who knew everything about him anyway, Severus drew on the warm clothes and hurried down to the dungeons.

The week before exams, the Slytherin common room converted into more of a study room. Gone were the roughhousing play fights, the riotous conversations around the fireplace, and even the weeping of particularly stressed seventh years. Rows of tables replaced the straight-backed leather furniture and students piled them with notes and texts.

Severus sat by himself in the common room at the end of one such table. He'd attempted studying in the library before but Sirius, James, and Remus spotted him. He'd been more careful after that about selecting private places but there weren't many in the castle. Even in abandoned classrooms he was likely to be disturbed by students, ghosts, and professors. The modified common room was a blessing and Severus took full advantage of it.

"Studying alone?" came a voice behind him. Severus turned carefully.

"Lucius," he said and tried to sweep any wariness off his face.

"Aren't you usually with that girl? Martha?" Lucius took the seat across from Severus.

"Marceline," he said. "She's sending an owl. It's her grandmother's birthday."

Lucius hummed, conveying absolute disinterest in the topic, and reached across the table. He plucked Severus's Potions essay from where it laid and Severus watched a bit helplessly as his light eyes roamed the parchment.

Eventually Lucius handed the scroll back and said, "I've heard great things about you."

"Me?" Severus practically squeaked. Lucius smiled - a startlingly genuine one that Severus had never seen on his features before.

"Yes, you. Severus Snape. Full marks in all your courses and earning dozens of points a week for our house. Professor Brantworth told me you were his star student." He paused. "Tragic, what happened to him."

Professor Brantworth, the Defense professor who Severus had rather liked, was discovered floating lifelessly in the Great Lake the week prior. Severus heard from Marceline just that morning that it was nothing more than an accidental drowning. No one could say why he'd gone into the lake though. His exams were now going to be administered by the headmaster, who Severus liked quite a bit less.

Severus got the impression that Lucius didn't particularly care about the professor despite his comment to the contrary.

"Severus Snape," Lucius said again, suddenly looking pensive. "Your father was homeschooled, you said?" At Severus's nod, he continued. "Funny thing though. *My* father works at the ministry. He looked at the homeschooling registry and no Snapes were ever recorded. There was a Snape at Hogwarts a century ago - Mudblood, unfortunately."

Severus worked to keep his expression as neutral as possible. He'd kept up his lie about his father being a homeschooled wizard and it undoubtedly made his life easier. There were other halfbloods scattered throughout Slytherin and even a Muggleborn in fifth year. They were generally ostracized, forced to eat alone and find friends in the other houses, if they could.

"I'm not sure—" Severus began. Lucius waved his hands dismissively.

"No need to lie. I understand you, Severus. You're shamed by your blood, as you should be. I find

it admirable, really. We'd be better off if all Mudbloods knew their place. I won't reveal your secret either. I'm about to graduate, you know, and Father's secured a prestigious internship. I don't care about school quibbles anymore." Lucius leaned forward. "I only wanted to say that I see you. You may be hearing from me over the summer."

Since Lucius already knew, Severus chose self-preservation over caution. "You can't owl me," Severus said with quiet urgency. "My dad hates magic; he'll be furious if he sees an owl."

Lucius laughed. It was a startlingly pleasant sound, almost musical. "A Muggle that hates magic married a witch," he said with what Severus could only read as genuine amusement. He pushed his chair away from the table and stood. "Fear not, Severus. I can be discreet."

He departed in a flourish of robes. Severus, thoroughly distracted, gave up on studying for the afternoon and packed up his things. He was unnerved by his own suspicion that Lucius hadn't been truly bragging about his ability to send undetected mail - that Lucius's discretion was being used for something with far greater importance and he, Severus, would find out what that was whether he wanted to or not.

Chapter 4

August 1972

The summer after first year dragged worse than any period in Severus's life before. Now that he was enrolled in school he could no longer get away with practicing magic at home. His wand sat uselessly on his windowsill. He would hold it sometimes, roll it between his palms, and whisper incantations without any intent to actually cast them.

While Severus was away at Hogwarts, Eileen had started working as a secretary for a local solicitor. She was gone long hours most weekdays and some weekends. When she did come home they swapped stories over chores. Eileen told him about the solicitor's latest cases and office gossip. Severus rehashed classes and described Marceline which made her smile impishly but she, thankfully, said nothing beyond, "How nice!"

It was as summer drew to a close that she asked, more hesitantly than was usual for her, "What about Sirius?"

Severus kept his gaze on the potato and the peeler in his hands. "What about him?"

"You two were so excited for school together," she said. There was a note of sympathy in her voice as if she'd already guessed things hadn't gone to plan. "Was it how you imagined?"

Severus sliced off the last bit of peel and tossed the potato into the boiling pot on the stove. It splashed droplets across the counters and floor.

"Of course," Severus lied. "We had loads of fun. We competed all the time for who could win the most points for Slytherin."

"Really?"

Severus nodded. "We're both trying out for the house team next year. He wants to play Beater. I think I'll go for Seeker."

"You have the build," Eileen said affectionately.

Quite without meaning to, Severus began to weave a fictitious life - that one that could have happened if Sirius hadn't gone into Gryffindor.

It was only as he finished setting the table and wrapped up a long winded tale of a prank on a second year that he realized he was merely parroting what Sirius and James had done and replacing James with himself.

He stopped talking then and ate his dinner, embarrassed for and at himself. Eileen took a few bites and then asked, "Why hasn't Sirius visited you this summer? He practically lived here before."

"He's in India," Severus said. His voice wavered. "Visiting some cousins."

It wasn't a lie. But his façade crumbled and Eileen seemed to know it. Perhaps she hadn't believed his tall tales in the first place. Either way she only smiled softly and placed her hand on her son's.

After clearing the dishes, Severus climbed upstairs before Tobias could return home from the pub

and find him. In his room, a folded sheet of parchment stuck out from between the window and sill, next to his wand. Severus tugged the sheet out and settled on his bed to read the latest letter from Lucius.

True to his word, he'd sent the first letter in the beginning of summer. Surprisingly none of it was as ominous as Severus expected. He shared news of his family, personal things like his plan to propose to Sirius's cousin Narcissa, and wizarding world news that Severus couldn't otherwise keep up.

The note he held in his hands was short:

Good luck at Hogwarts this year. I might be too busy to write often. Keep working hard; do Slytherin proud.

Lucius's dramatic signature curled across the bottom quarter of the page. Severus refolded the note and stuck it with the rest of his collection inside his school trunk. He wouldn't bin the notes, even shredded, out of fear that Tobias would see it and ask questions or, worse, draw his own conclusions. Since he didn't go into Severus's room, he wouldn't see the trunk so that, at least, was safe.

Having finished his schoolwork weeks ago, Severus pulled out a book he'd stolen from the Hogwarts library. They were enchanted to return themselves but Severus managed to undo the charm on this book. The text was nothing special: Foul Beasts Throughout History. It was quite long, though, over a thousand pages and Severus had known he'd need something to keep him occupied.

He spent the evening copying diagrams out of the book and like that another day in the longest summer ever drew to a close.

October 1972 - Second Year

"Happy Halloween," Sirius said and dumped a pillowcase full of candy out onto the desk. Severus picked up a piece of chocolate nougat and began to peel off the gold wrapper.

"Oh." Severus frowned and dropped the unwrapped sweet on the desk. It was, after all, a cockroach cluster.

"That must've been from Frank. Git," Sirius said affectionately and swept the cluster back into the pillowcase. "Try another one."

They sampled chocolate after chocolate, a pile of wrappers growing steadily between them.

"Pettigrew dressed up as a rat," Sirius was saying as Severus waved off another caramel crunch bar. "The whole world of costumes and he picks an ugly vermin."

"What did you dress up as?"

"A Muggle," Sirius said proudly.

"That's not any better." Severus scrunched the wrappers in his fist and tossed them with the cockroach cluster. "Jeans and a t-shirt, really?"

"But I wasn't trying! That's the joke, see? Peter actually went out and bought ears and a tail. He

even let Marlene paint his face. All that to look stupid.” Sirius leaned back in his chair and regarded Severus thoughtfully. “You’d make a good vampire, you know.”

“Slytherins don’t have costume parties,” Severus said with an affected posh air and Sirius grinned.

“They don’t have fun, you mean.”

Severus was mid-reply when the door banged open, peals of laughter drifting in. In a bit of a panic, he jumped out of his chair and whirled to point his wand at the door.

“Snape?” James asked from the doorway. Whatever amusement he’d shared with Remus quickly faded. The latter boy stood at his side, looking withdrawn and wary as ever. “Sirius?”

“You interrupted our duel,” Sirius cried and Severus glanced at him. Sirius held his own wand up but pointed at Severus. A chill spread through him as he took in Sirius’s steely expression.

“Go on then,” James said, grin returning.

“Maybe we should just leave,” Remus muttered.

Severus’s wand fell to his side and he didn’t even attempt to lift it as he watched Sirius’s lips move.

A bolt of white light lashed across his face and with it blossomed pain. It was pain as bad as any punch from Tobias, maybe worse from the way it burned its way through his skin and deep into his flesh.

“Stinging hex,” James said with unconcealed admiration. Remus watched, seemingly distraught. “That’s third year stuff, isn’t it?”

Sirius looked worried and something about that angered Severus more than if he’d looked as insufferably smug as his friend.

Severus jerked his wand for a tripping jinx and Sirius stumbled but managed to catch himself without falling entirely. He shot back a stunning spell which Severus easily dodged at the same moment that he cast the leg-locking spell. Sirius did fall then, legs clamped together but arms spinning wildly trying to stay upright.

“That’s enough!” James shouted and in any other circumstances Severus might have laughed at his arrogance and hypocrisy. All it did then was irritate him.

His face still burned. It reminded him of the times Sirius snuck into his room with healing salve, when Severus foolishly believed he’d found a best friend.

“Furnuculus,” Severus spat and Sirius yelled as boils erupted across his cheeks. James twitched, going for his wand, and Severus stunned him carelessly. Remus might as well be stunned for he only stood there, eyes rounded.

“We’ll get you,” Sirius yelled after him as Severus swept out of the classroom.

He remembered the words later as he stood in the Slytherin bathroom applying murtlap essence to the blistered red mark on his cheek. He wasn’t scared of whatever Sirius could do to him. Tobias taught him to tolerate physical pain at a young age.

It was only that it was Sirius coming after him that hurt.

January 1973

The Great Hall hummed with recollections of travel the first morning back from winter holidays. Severus, of course, had not left the castle but he clustered at a table with Marceline, Achilles, and Evan, only half listening as they bragged about foreign destinations and lavish gifts. The other half of his attention was, as always the past couple months, warily trained on the trio of gits sitting at the Gryffindor table.

“My dad lives in Paris,” Marceline said to Evan’s news that he’d traveled there. “It’s a shame that the Muggle attractions are far grander than ours. Of course, Papá won’t allow me to *go* to any of the Muggle ones.”

“We climbed the Eiffel Tower. It was bloody freezing.” Evan recounted a tale full of odd Muggle encounters that made Marceline giggle and Achilles shake his head. Severus speared bits of pancake onto his fork and then dragged them back off without taking a bite.

“We stayed home,” Achilles said and glanced around the table before adding in a lower tone, “Pater’s been meeting with-”

Evan interrupted with a loud shushing noise. “Not in the Great Hall, you slobbering hound.”

“Slobbering hound?” Marceline wrinkled her nose. “Where do you come up with these, Evan?”

Amid their banter, Severus mumbled a goodbye and slipped out of the hall. Marceline caught up with him a few steps outside the doors.

“How was your holiday?” she asked, knocking her bag into his playfully.

“You know,” he said and she made a sympathetic face because she did.

“Snape!” Severus tensed and turned, hand shooting to his wand. It was only Lily Evans scurrying up to them, a tentative smile on her face.

Marceline looked on sourly as Severus said, “Evans.”

“Hi Marceline,” Lily said pleasantly in the face of Marceline’s scowl and then, “I was wondering...” She fiddled with a strand of golden red hair, the lightest pink blush brushing across her face. “Would you two want to work with me on Slughorn’s project?”

“With *you*?” Marceline asked. “A Gryffindor M-”

“I will,” Severus interrupted, only to avoid the word he still disliked after nearly two years of hearing it regularly.

“You will?” Lily asked happily at the exact same moment Marceline hissed, “You *will*?”

“You should too,” Severus said to Marceline. “Evans is gifted at Potions.”

Lily beamed. Marceline looked confused.

“Fine,” she said eventually.

“Great!” Lily hefted her bag up higher on her shoulder. “I’m looking forward to it. And Marceline? Don’t ever try to call me that word again.”

Lily bounced away before Marceline could answer.

"That's a four week project," she complained as they made their way up a flight of stairs towards Charms. "Four weeks of working with Slughorn's pet."

"Exactly," Severus said. "It'll be the easiest mark we ever make."

"You," Marceline declared, suddenly cheerful, "are brilliant."

Severus knew that wasn't actually why he'd said yes. He could've cut Marceline off by turning the offer down. For some reason he was intrigued by Lily Evans. Gryffindors and Slytherin did not approach each other with offers of partnership. And absolutely no one approached Severus.

It would be, at the very least, something interesting.

July 1973

Garrison Grocery & More stood between a drug store and a pub. It was one of the many places Severus had shuffled to the first week of summer to ask for a job, at Tobias's insistence. All the other store owners looked at Severus - scrawny ankles showing beneath too-short trousers and the oversized cardigan his mother passed down when none of his other tops would cover his midriff - and turned him away with varying degrees of politeness. The woman that ran the butcher shop threw her head back and cackled until he shuffled out, flushed with shame.

Eugene Garrison called the Snape phone and when Eileen answered he offered Severus a job to begin at 6 AM the following morning.

Mr. Garrison supplied Severus with a stack of black polo shirts, gray slacks exactly Severus's size, a few pairs of socks, and a green apron. "Your uniform," he gruffed out. Severus noted the other employees wore all kinds of things under their aprons - floral tops, bell bottoms, patterned dresses. Severus didn't point this out to Mr. Garrison. He'd never had an entire set of new, well-fitting clothes. Tobias took most of his new paycheck but Severus smuggled some away to launder his clothes instead of scrubbing them at home. He also kept enough to buy lunch once a week in the grocery's deli.

It was an overcast Wednesday in mid-July when Severus glanced up from bagging groceries and found Sirius Black across from him. He wore Muggle clothes - a garishly patterned button down and flared denim - and held a loaf of bread in one hand, extended slightly as though it was a soiled rag.

"Can I buy this?" Sirius asked. They'd wandered through the stores many times as children but never to actually purchase anything. Sirius looked as if he had no idea how it worked, as if he thought it was an entirely different process from a wizarding shop.

"Do you have money?"

"Not Muggle money."

"Then no." Severus reached for the bread; Sirius pulled it back and up out of his reach. An elderly woman began a slow shuffle from the produce section toward the till, carrying a plastic basket full of grocery staples. "What do you want?"

"To talk." Sirius relented and placed the bread down. "Can we?"

Severus remembered Sirius glaring at him, his face stinging. He remembered Tobias twisting his arm and bruises blooming the next day. He remembered Sirius four years younger, listening as Severus aired every dirty skeleton in his familial closet. He remembered different attacks over the past year: Sirius tripping him in the library, turning his legs to jelly in the greenhouse, and loudly wondering why Marceline and Lily bothered to spend their time with a big-nosed greaseball.

“Fine,” Severus said. The old woman queued behind Sirius and watched the two of them intently. “My shift is over at 4.”

Sirius beamed the full, easy grin Severus had always admired. “Brilliant. I’ll be back then.” He slipped out the door.

“Friend of yours?” Mr. Garrison asked a few minutes later when the woman shuffled off and Severus went back to stocking cans.

“No,” Severus said. Mr. Garrison scoffed but didn’t press.

Sirius stood on the sidewalk when Severus pushed through the door three hours later. He held two ice cream cones and thrust one out as Severus approached. “Pistachio,” he said. “Your favorite.”

“I thought you didn’t have money.” Severus eyed the cone but didn’t take it.

“I didn’t.” Sirius chomped into the other cone. “I’ve been practicing pickpocketing.”

“Hooligan.” Severus felt a swell of affection so powerful that it terrified him. Why did he have to like Sirius so much even after everything the other boy had done to him? It would be so much easier if Severus could hate him the way he deserved.

“You don’t want the ice cream?”

“No,” Severus said. With a shrug, Sirius tossed it into a green metal can stationed outside Garrison Grocery.

They walked down the sidewalk through rows of shops. They’d come here often as young children and they fell into step, their bodies leading them automatically through familiar routes.

“What do you want?” Severus asked once again when they’d walked for several minutes in silence.

“I got sent home early,” Sirius said, which was not an answer. “Narcissa and Bellatrix went to Bombay to shop for formal robes. While they were out I found a Muggle village nearby. Snogged a girl I met there and someone who knows my uncle told him - they’re much less prejudiced against Muggles there; it’s class they care about, not blood - and he told my mum and, long story short, here I am.”

Sirius finished his meandering tale by drawing in a deep breath. Then he smirked at Severus as though expecting applause.

“You cursed me,” Severus said flatly and Sirius flinched as though Severus had moved to strike him.

“It was only a stinging hex,” he said, but quietly.

“That time. Before that there was itching powder and color-changing my hair green and after there were all kinds of curses. You’ve been-” Severus cut himself off as he searched for the right word.

“A shit-for-brains tosser?” Sirius supplied helpfully. “I know it, Sev. It’s not - do you want me to tell James we’re friends? I will.”

“Of course not.” Severus shook away visions of Sirius forcing the three of them to all hang out together. “I’ll take you not hexing me at every turn. Or any turn, for that matter.”

“Done,” Sirius said immediately. “We have bigger plans for this year. I can convince James to lay off you, no problem.”

“Alright.”

“Alright?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“You can punch me,” Sirius offered. “Hex me. Pants me.”

Severus made a face at the last one. “Why would I ever do that?”

“It’d be humiliating,” Sirius said reasonably and Severus couldn’t fully hold back a smile.

The conversation continued as dusk fell. It wasn’t like their childhood all over again as they strolled the street. There was a distance between them. Severus looked at Sirius and saw his friend and his enemy all in one.

They stopped a few houses down from the Snape home. “Is he home?” Sirius asked.

“At the pub right now,” Severus said.

“Is he still beating on you?”

“Nah.” Maybe a year ago, Severus would have launched into the tale of how Mr. Garrison’s short sleeve polos and the accompanying paycheck tempered Tobias’s fists. Perhaps he would have shared his suspicion that he was a less appealing target now that he was not so physically vulnerable. He might have shared about Eileen’s job, the story of their failed attempt at making rice krispie cakes, how Lucius Malfoy continued to slip letters under his window.

Instead Severus left his answer at one word and kept the rest of it to himself.

“Good,” Sirius said. “I’ll see you around then?”

It was later as Severus tried to sleep that two questions ran a circuit in his mind: Why was he so happy to have made up with Sirius? And why was he so uncomfortable with his story about the Muggle in Bombay?

Chapter 5

October 1973 - Third Year

Marceline slipped her hand inside Lily's and tugged her forward. "Finally! I thought he'd never let us leave. I swear Filch gets hot searching us."

"Marcie." Lily blanched. "That's disgusting."

"Am I wrong though?"

"I don't want to think about anything that involves Filch and getting hot in the same sentence."

"Point." Marceline dropped Lily's hand and looked over her shoulder at Severus where he trailed several paces behind them. "Where should we go first, Sev?"

He looked around the streets of Hogsmeade with unfeigned disinterest. He'd tried to beg off the trip but Marceline had the annoying habit of getting what she wanted. She talked circles around Severus until he very reluctantly agreed.

"Wherever." Marceline and Lily shared a look of exasperation.

"I want to send my sister some sweets," Lily said. "Let's go to Honeydukes."

"Your Muggle sister?" Marceline asked. Some of the cheer left Lily's face.

"I thought we were past this."

"I'm not being prejudiced!" Marceline glanced back at Severus, this time seeking his support. Having heard her recently mutter *Mudbloods are polluting the castle* after a first year Hufflepuff knocked into her in the corridor, Severus offered none.

Lily hummed but said nothing else. The visit to Honeydukes passed quietly with a few snippets of strained conversation. Back on the street, Marceline noticed Kamila Shafiq and Freya Aberdeen.

"I'm going to catch up with them," she said. "Don't wait for me."

Lily watched her go and then turned to Severus. "You're the only Slytherin that doesn't have a problem with Muggleborns."

"You might be right." Severus watched the girls in green and silver talk animatedly. Marceline showed a genuine ease she hadn't around Lily.

"I wish you'd been sorted into Ravenclaw," she said as they began to walk again. "You're clever enough and then maybe you and James wouldn't hate each other."

"Potter hates me?" Severus smiled. "I'm flattered."

"You were much less flattered when he charmed your robes invisible."

"On the contrary, knowing Potter wanted to see my pants so badly only further inflates my ego," Severus said, speaking calmly even as he inwardly writhed with humiliation at the memory. The figurative undressing had been especially horrible because James did it in the middle of lunch and

drew the entire hall's attention with his cackling. At least it had been the only attack that year.

Lily sighed. "I hope you all will grow up one day."

"Don't lump me in with them! I haven't cast so much as a Rictusempra this year."

"Oh," Lily said with a smug, knowing grin. "So it wasn't you that levitated a Biting Fairy into the common room?"

Severus matched her grin and changed the subject.

December 1973

"And it's Longbottom with the Quaffle, hurtling straight for Slytherin's posts. He's going for it - ahhh, blocked by Rosier."

A storm of disappointment thundered from the Gryffindor fans while an equally riotous cheer went up around Severus. He winced at the assault on his eardrums. John Wilkes on his left flopped back down into his seat and grinned at him.

"Not enjoying your first match, I take it?"

Severus sneered in answer. He certainly was not; he'd attended only at John's request

"Still, the noise will stop us from being overheard." John leaned forward and lowered his voice as he continued. "Lucius Malfoy wants to meet with you."

"Why didn't he owl me then?" Severus asked and immediately wondered if his correspondence with Lucius was supposed to be a secret. Three years of letters and he still couldn't figure why Lucius kept writing back.

"Owls can be intercepted," John said and looked, bizarrely, at Professor Dumbledore.

It was that way often with the Slytherins. They seemed to think he knew a secret that in actuality he'd never been told. He'd puzzled out it had something to do with Muggles and Dumbledore but hadn't gotten much further than that.

"So will you meet him? The Three Broomsticks next Hogsmeade weekend?"

"Alright," Severus agreed. He wasn't sure he really had a choice to say no. "That's after winter holidays, isn't it?"

"Valentine's weekend," John confirmed and then leapt to his feet to howl along their housemates. Severus looked at the pitch to see James streaking around the pitch, one hand on his broom and the other lifted above his head clutching the snitch.

"Damn," Severus murmured, as expressive as he cared to be. He was more disappointed in James's success than bothered by Slytherin's failure.

There was a single high pitched scream from among the Gryffindors followed by a chorus of overlapping shouts. Severus looked over at the sound reflexively. His gaze moved just in time to see Sirius's head snap back from the impact of a bludger crashing into his temple. His body went spinning off his broom and Severus's wand shot off a slowing charm even before his conscious brain finished thinking, *Oh shit.*

Sirius's body stalled in its rapid descent a few meters above the ground and traveled the rest of the way gently downward as if giant invisible hands held him. Severus caught a glimpse of Sirius sprawled on the grass before Gryffindor players and professors obscured him from view.

John turned to look at him, one questioning eyebrow raised, and so did Achilles on his right but no one else seemed to have noticed the source of the thin beam of light.

Severus shrugged and forced a bland expression on his face. "Instinct, I suppose."

"So good at spells you cast them even for blood traitors," Achilles said, half-joking and half-chastising. John said nothing and his silence unnerved Severus.

Sirius was levitated out, still unconscious, and the stands emptied. Severus went down with Achilles and on the grounds they were joined by Marceline and Freya. They whinged about the loss all through the walk to the hall and dinner. Severus said close to nothing but that was hardly atypical.

He worked on his homework with the other third years in the library. When they packed up to go to bed, he pretended to have forgotten something in the Great Hall and split off from the group.

Once he was sure he was alone, he headed toward the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey met him at the entrance. "How may I help you, Mr. Snape? It's almost curfew."

"I want to see Sirius Black," he said, quietly because he couldn't see past the mediwizards to know who else was in the wing.

She looked startled, then confused, and finally settled on irritated. "If you thought now would be an opportune time to mess with an injured student—"

"We're friends," Severus interrupted just as quietly as before.

Madam Pomfrey paused, looked him over, and softened. "I see. Well, he's all healed up and returned to his common room. You'd best share your well wishes in the morning. Goodnight, Mr. Snape."

She shut the doors and a murmured locking charm followed. With no other option, Severus headed down to his dorm.

He saw Sirius at breakfast the next morning looking in perfect health. They had Potions and Herbology together that day. On the way out of the greenhouse, Severus bumped into Sirius, slipping a note into his robe as he did. It was a bit of a clumsy maneuver but that only ensured Sirius saw the parchment.

"Watch where you're going," James growled, rushing over to stand next to Sirius. "First you snakes set a bludger on him, now you're attacking him in class? To think Sirius has been telling us to lay off this year. I hope last night knocked some sense into you, mate."

When they met up later on the sixth floor per the note, Severus couldn't stop grinning.

"You enjoyed seeing me concussed, then?" Sirius asked, bemused.

"You really did tell them to knock it off."

"What?"

“Potter said-”

“You’re a twat,” Sirius interrupted. “I’m injured and you only care about your dumb rivalry with James.”

“You look fine to me.”

“Fantastic. See you around.”

Sirius stormed out of the room and Severus was left to wonder what exactly he’d done wrong.

April 1974

A miserably heavy rain blanketed the grounds of Hogwarts. Water pooled in the garden around Hagrid’s hut and the lake flooded, turning the shore marshy. The entire population of Hogwarts holed up in their respective common rooms to stay dry and warm over the wet weekend.

That made it the perfect opportunity for Sirius and Severus to catch up. They planned the excursion in a flurry of owls and at noon met up inside the furthest greenhouse.

“Why didn’t I think of Impervius?” Sirius complained as he stumped in, soaked to the bone, and found Severus completely dry.

“I’m smarter than you,” Severus answered easily. He turned from the potted soporous plant he’d studied while waiting and immediately wished he hadn’t. He watched as Sirius stripped off his shirt and robes then stretched them out across a worktable. He withdrew his wand and began casting a hot air charm on them. “Is removing your clothing necessary?”

“They dry faster this way,” Sirius said. “I’m doing my trousers next. You’ll really blush at that one, you big prude.”

Since Severus spent the first eleven years of his life covering his body and its assorted marks of abuse, it was true that he wasn’t particularly comfortable when disrobed. That association generally translated to others too; he’d always disliked the locker room after flying lessons. But that wasn’t the reason he hastily turned back to the plants, mouth dry.

“Are you decent yet?” Severus asked after a few minutes and was relieved his voice didn’t crack.

“I’m always decent,” Sirius said. “But my bits are all covered if that’s what you mean.”

“As fascinating as your bits are...”

“Florence thinks so.”

“Which one is she again? The Hufflepuff?”

Sirius laughed, the same barking laugh he’d had since childhood. “Yes, the Hufflepuff, and the only girl I’ve been snogging. Git.” Sirius plucked a dried leaf out of a pile and began to shred it into pieces. Severus wrestled the urge to warn Sirius not to touch stray leaves in a magical greenhouse. “I was kidding about the bits thing. Plus she got mad when I said I wouldn’t write her over the summer. I don’t think she’s speaking to me anymore.”

“She’s fifth year isn’t she? A bit old for you,” Severus said and a voice that sounded dreadfully

like Tobias hissed inside his head, *That's not really the problem you have with her, is it? Idiot.*

"Her birthday's in August," Sirius said and swept all the pieces of leaf off the worktable onto the floor. "So we're only about a year apart, really. But like I said. That's over. What about you and Blanchet?"

"Marceline?" Severus grimaced. "I've told you. We're friends."

"Evans, then? Although I really won't be able to keep James off you if you go after her."

"No," Severus said. "I'm not interested in girls." Hastily, spurred by the odd look Sirius sent his way, he added, "They have cooties and all."

"Cooties," Sirius echoed. He looked unconvinced.

"Did you finish your Divination homework?" Severus asked in a bit of a desperate bid to change the subject.

"I've sworn off homework," Sirius said. "I calculated it out. If I score well on all my exams I can get zeroes on the rest of it and still pass."

"Scraping by on the bare minimum. Impressive."

"We can't all be Severus Snape, star pupil. How many points have you earned this year? Six thousand?" Severus tried and failed not to grin at the rare compliment from Sirius, even with the mocking edge to it.

"And we won the cup," Severus said, only to rankle Sirius. Sirius responded with a very wounded look.

"Below the robe, that one was."

They continued talking in the warm confines of the greenhouse. The rain beat steadily on the glass panes in a rhythmically soothing way. Severus relaxed more than he had all year. It felt mostly like they were uncomplicated friends again, except for the one very inconvenient thing that Severus was determined to not fully acknowledge.

Chapter 6

June 1974

Severus stuffed his apron into the newly installed lockers, ignoring the Muggle coworker jabbering away next to him. He was often being talked at but when it came to his schoolmates he had reason to at least feign interest. The boy next to him had no relevance to his life so Severus didn't say a word to end the conversation, just turned and walked out of the break room, through Garrison Grocery & More, and out the glass doors onto the sidewalk.

The walk home was so familiar at this point Severus zoned out and so he flinched out of genuine surprise when he came to in front of house and found Lucius Malfoy lounging on his front porch.

They'd seen each other in Hogsmeade only months previously but it was something else entirely to have him in front of his house, dressed in his typical robes as though there wasn't a Muggle neighbor staring openly as she watered her peonies.

"Sorry to startle you," Lucius said with a smirk that belied the apology. "I need to speak with you."

"Lucky Tobias isn't here," Severus said as he opened the front door.

"Not luck. I remembered your fear and planned my visit accordingly."

Severus wanted to argue that he wasn't afraid of his father but that wasn't quite true.

Severus, having never had a guest other than Sirius who hardly counted, knew none of the expected pleasantries. He didn't offer a drink or snip about the weather. He only leaned against the wall in the sitting room and watched Lucius settle himself comfortably against the sofa cushions.

"I knew you were a half-blood but I didn't know quite the depths from which you've ascended." Lucius looked at the rickety coffee table, the dusty and mostly bare bookshelf, and the kitchen door hanging askew on loose hinges. He lifted his eyes from his surroundings and settled them onto Severus's. "You remember what we discussed?"

"Of course."

"Now that you've had time to consider, I'd be honored to hear your conclusion."

"I'm only fourteen," Severus said, which was a weak reply even to his own ears. Lucius allowed disappointment to cross his face.

"Obviously you won't be doing much until you're fully trained," Lucius said. "Being that it's likely the Dark Lord will be Minister before you graduate, now is the time to show loyalty before he suspects your motivation to be that of self-preservation." Lucius paused here and took another careful look around him. "You do share our distaste for Muggles, don't you?"

Did he? "Right." Lucius didn't look convinced. "The only Muggles I know are my father and my classmates from childhood. They're all morons."

"If you say so." Lucius stood and Severus knew with plunging certainty that he'd disappointed the man. "Well, think about what I've said. I won't be able to owl you anymore. Between the Dark Lord, work, and my future wife, my time is quite occupied. Be sure to reach out if you make up

your mind.”

Lucius swept out.

September 1974 - Fourth Year

The Hogwarts library was mostly disused in the beginning of term. Students were too fresh off summer holiday to really buckle down, barring the most studious among them. So Severus and Lily met there in a table hidden amongst towering bookshelves where none of their housemates could glare, scoff, or judge.

“...and that’s when Petunia threw a vase at me,” Lily finished miserably. “I wish I knew why she hates me so much.”

“She’s jealous,” Severus said. He thought of his own magic-hating father. “You make her feel inferior.”

“It’s not fair.” She dropped her head down onto a stack of books, turning it so she could still see him. “All I’ve ever wanted is to get along with her.”

“Seems like that’s not going to happen.”

Lily sighed. “I know.” She lifted her head and propped it up on one fist, watching him intently. “How was your summer, then?”

“Boring. I worked at the grocery and did my schoolwork.”

“You should come to mine next summer,” Lily said and there was something devilish in her sudden smile. “Petunia would hate it.”

“What happened to getting along?” Severus asked, smirking.

“Ah, well, we are still sisters.” Lily reached out and tapped Severus on the forehead with one finger. “I’m serious. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t,” Severus said and he meant it. But she would, surely, and he wouldn’t remind her. The mere thought of asking Tobias for permission to go visit a friend from school made his heart race and his palms clammy. He hadn’t hit Severus in years but it was not a good idea to test if he still had it in him.

Maybe if he could pass her off as someone from the village. Maybe that she was a girl would soften him. He’d harped on Severus’s lack of manliness often enough. But something about offering Lily up to Tobias that way, presenting her as anything other than a kind person and good friend - a holiday wasn’t worth that.

For a moment he thought of telling her about Tobias and how he made thrown vases look like child’s play. But only his mother and Sirius knew and he couldn’t quite find the justification to let her in on the secret.

So instead he offered, “Something interesting did happen, I suppose. It’d be more accurate to say bizarre. Lucius Malfoy visited me.”

Lily had settled her head back on the table in the silence but at this news she bolted upright. “The old Head Boy? Why?”

"You've...heard of the Death Eaters, haven't you?"

"Who hasn't?" She grabbed a hunk of hair, twisting it nervously in her grip. "He's one, then? I'd heard rumors - Marlene's sister-" Lily broke off and took a deep steady breath. "Why? Why you? It can't only be because you're Slytherin."

"I think it is," Severus said.

"Slytherin and the best wizard in our year," Lily said, still shaken but suddenly more thoughtful than afraid. "But we're just kids."

"That's what I said." Talking about Lucius was easing the burden he'd carried ever since the visit.

"Well," Lily said, "there's only one thing for it. You'll have to be better than them. More gifted with spells and potions. That way you can defend yourself."

It was not a bad idea. Severus nodded. "I'll work on it."

"And I'll help." Lily reached across the table and took his hand. Only his mother ever touched him but something about Lily felt the same - comforting and familiar. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before pulling back. For a moment they sat and smiled at each other, confident in themselves and their friendship.

February 1975

"No way there were twenty pixies."

"Alright, at least fifteen then."

"I have a hard time believing a dozen."

"Well, you weren't there!"

"Ooh, defensive. That's a sure sign of a liar."

Severus sat smushed into the innermost seat in a booth stuffed full of fourth year Slytherins. They bickered and teased each other while Severus peered at the borrowed sixth year Potions textbook in front of him. Barely listening to the conversation, he chose instead to review Galpalott's Third Law.

The jingling charm on the door of The Three Broomsticks went off, barely audible above the many conversations filling the room. Severus glanced up, then quickly stared back down at his book.

Marceline elbowed him. "Hey look, it's your best friend." Severus scowled at her as the rest of the booth's occupants turned to watch Sirius push his way through the crowd. When he reached an open booth, he slid in, and a dark-haired girl Severus didn't recognize took a seat across from him.

"That's right," John said. "You saved him from Montague's bludger last year."

Severus closed his book.

"Ignore him," Evan said, roughly bumping his shoulder into John's. "He's jealous he couldn't cast a spell in twice the time it took you to fire off that slowing charm."

"Maybe so." John leaned in. "But then again, I've heard you have a weakness for Mudbloods."

Severus thought of Lucius sneering at his house and slipped his book into his bag.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Severus said coldly.

"The redhead," John said and some of the tightness in Severus relaxed.

"She's good at potions, that's all," he said dismissively. "Perhaps instead of watching what I do, you should be worried that a Mudblood outperforms you."

The slur felt heavy and bitter on his tongue but it had the intended effect. John flushed a furious scarlet while the others laughed and hooted derisively.

"He's got you there," Marceline said. "Let's go, Severus. These children are boring me."

Severus knew that he'd created a fragile house of cards all balanced on the lie that his father was a wizard. His housemates, the blood purists, the Death Eaters - they were bringing a storm sure to blow the stack right over.

It was ridiculous that despite real threats to his safety, Severus trailed behind Marceline and his brain chose to focus on replaying the sight of Sirius in the booth, on a date with someone else.

Chapter 7

August 1975

The grass of the cemetery swished dew against Severus's boots as he moved over it. He stepped slowly, delaying the moment he fiercely desired and infinitely dreaded at the same time.

"Over here," Sirius said quietly on his right. Severus turned and found him crouching before a laminated marker sticking out of the ground, lowering the paper-wrapped flowers he'd brought.

Eileen Snape

5 April 1931 - 17 August 1975

Severus looked down at the paper. She'd had a pauper's funeral; he hadn't been able to stomach going. It was his first time seeing his mother's grave.

He felt a sudden wave of revulsion as he considered what laid underneath his feet. Her body, emptied out and filled with fluid, hard and unmoving.

He wanted to throw up. He turned and sprinted away, stopping only once he stood outside the wrought iron fence containing the graves.

Sirius stepped up beside him. "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!" Severus spat. He thought he might be howling.

"Okay, sor—" Sirius cut himself off. "What can I say? What can I do?"

"Tell me about when you met her."

They walked away from the cemetery together. Sirius recited stories of the few times he'd met Eileen, all years ago before they ever stepped foot into Hogwarts.

"...and then she made me a sandwich. I remember because you told me you never got to eat sandwiches. So I saved half in my pocket and gave it to you later."

"Will you come inside?" Severus asked when they came to a stop outside his house. Eileen's house, the one in which she'd told him stories, taught him chores, bandaged his scrapes, kissed him goodnight. "I don't want to be alone."

"Tobias?" Sirius said the name very softly, as though afraid of the reaction it would cause.

"Hasn't been home since...he's not home. Said he wasn't ever coming back but I'm not holding my breath."

Sirius followed him inside and up the stairs. "First time not climbing through the window," Sirius said as they sat down, facing each other on Severus's bed.

It was different than when they were kids. The bed was barely big enough for Severus let alone them both. There was something awkward about it, perhaps too personal, but Severus couldn't care enough to mind.

"You know the last thing I said to her?" Severus knew he should stop but he spent a lot of time

concealing everything about himself. He wanted, for once, to speak without thinking, the way everyone else always seemed to.

“What?” Sirius asked.

“That I’m queer.” He used the word he’d heard back on the playground at his Muggle school and it felt as unwelcome in his mouth as *Mudblood*. Severus searched Sirius’s face for anything - shock or disgust or, foolest of hopes, reciprocation. Instead he looked blank.

“You’re what?”

“I like boys,” Severus said. “Do...do magical people not do that?”

“Oh!” Sirius shifted on the bed but didn’t run away screaming. Severus took that as a good sign. “Sure, of course they do. Right, Muggles don’t like that, do they? Wizards don’t care.” He paused. “What did Eileen say?”

“She was upset.” Severus couldn’t fight off the image of Eileen ghostly pale and shaking him frantically by the shoulders. “She didn’t speak to me for a week. And then...”

“She loved you,” Sirius said instantly. “She would have come around. She had Muggle parents, right? But she would’ve gotten over it.”

“Maybe,” Severus said, unconvinced.

Silence wrapped around them, heavy and oppressive. It reminded Severus of the oversized coat he used to wear to hide Tobias’s marks. He’d always wanted to tear off the coat and couldn’t. He had more power over the silence.

“Would you kiss me?”

Sirius’s eyebrows flew dramatically high but only for a moment. Then they softened back to their normal place and without an ounce of hesitation, Sirius leaned forward and pressed their mouths together.

Severus expected kissing to be dry, like when he’d practiced on the back of his hand. Instead Sirius’s full lips were warm and wet against his. His heart hammered painfully in his chest as a twisting sensation slipped through him. He lifted his hands to the thick mop he’d always admired, carded his hands through Sirius’s hair, and drew him closer.

Sirius pulled away first. Severus wanted to dive forward and close the distance again. He pressed his palms into his knees and stayed still.

“Still, er, queer?” Sirius asked with a comfortable, crooked grin.

“Yes. What about...?”

“Me?” Sirius shrugged. “I’ll snog anybody.”

The words darted straight to the warmth inside Severus and popped it. Florence had been *a nice girl* and Severus was *anybody*.

What had he really expected though? Sirius only agreed because Eileen was dead.

Chilled and nauseated, Severus stood. “You should go.”

"Yeah." Sirius climbed off the bed. "I'm going to owl you since Tobias isn't here. Owl me back or Putu will peck your finger off."

Severus didn't write back. When the owl tapped on the glass, he didn't even open the window to accept the letter. He laid in bed, tried to forget the kiss, and missed his mother.

September 1975 - Fifth Year

Sirius flattened a sheet of parchment against the desk and then smirked up at Severus. "Ready to be impressed?"

"Disappointed, more like," Severus said. He was gratified and chastised by the look of irritation Sirius sent him.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he muttered and lines of ink began to spread from where his wand touched the parchment. Severus watched them unfurl and take shape - corridors, doorways, minute replications of statues.

"A map of Hogwarts," Severus began, ready to launch a derisive attack, but the words died in his throat as labeled dots pinpricked the map.

He looked on the fourth floor and found his dot, S. Snape, nearly overlapping the one on top of S. Black.

"You are so impressed," Sirius said with his best braggadocious grin. "Admit it."

"You and Potter made this?" Severus traced a finger over the Slytherin common room where so many dots clumped together that he could barely make out any names.

"And Remus and Peter," Sirius said and then, "We needed something like this."

"What for? You haven't tormented anyone since third year." Severus looked up from the map.
"Openly, anyway."

"Ha ha," Sirius scoffed. "Trust me, this has a far greater importance than pranks."

"Which is?"

"Can't tell you."

"I bet it has something to do with Lupin."

"Shut up." Sirius tapped the map and said, "Mischief managed." He rolled it back up and concealed it within his robes. "I told you to stop with that."

Severus thought about arguing. It wasn't that he wanted to harass Remus, seeing as Severus had the suspicion their stories were somewhat similar. Only Remus disappeared so often that he couldn't help but be curious. Why did Professor Dumbledore allow Remus's tormentor (Dad? Mum? Someone else entirely?) to retrieve him so often? Why didn't Remus refuse to go?

Then again, on that last part, Severus wasn't sure what he would do if Tobias summoned him in the middle of the year, even after everything.

"You'll have to bring that every time we see each other," Severus said. "Or else your friends will find out who you slum with."

“Shut up.” Hands now unoccupied, Sirius closed the distance between them. “I’m bored talking.”

“You’re always bored.”

“I won’t be if we’re snogging.”

So they did, as they had most nights since term began a few weeks earlier. Severus didn’t know what Sirius was saying to his friends to be able to get away so often. He didn’t ask. Knowing Sirius, he wouldn’t tell anyway.

Severus was getting caught up in it, no matter how many times he forced himself to replay Sirius casually saying, *I’ll snog anyone*. It had to be different. He had to mean more. And if he didn’t, as long as he didn’t ask, he could at least pretend otherwise.

December 1975

When Severus went down to breakfast the first morning of winter holidays, he couldn’t decide if he was still asleep, hallucinating, or cursed. Because he looked at the singular table, at the handful of staff and students left behind, and saw Sirius sitting there, wolfing down a stack of pancakes.

The others were two Hufflepuffs, first or second years by the looks of it, and a boy who Severus knew to be the Ravenclaw Prefect. Professor Dumbledore sat stirring a bowl of porridge and Rubeus Hagrid sat at his side cutting into a sausage.

“Welcome, Mr. Snape. Please take a seat.” Professor Dumbledore didn’t usually invite students to meals but then they usually didn’t stand there gawking like Severus was.

“Right,” he said uncertainly and drifted closer to the table. There was an open seat on the bench with the Prefect and one next to Sirius. He couldn’t decide which one to take.

“Right here, Snape,” Sirius said with a sudden, knowing smirk. “It’s Christmas, who cares about houses?”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Dumbledore sounded rapturous, beaming at Sirius as though he had single handedly revised Amhurst’s Rule of Counter-jinxes.

Severus sat without a word and ate just as quietly. He felt embarrassed, wrong-footed. He finished quickly and slipped out of the Great Hall. When Sirius caught up with him down the corridor, he turned to him and snarled, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Sirius blinked. “I thought you’d be happy.”

“Why would I be happy to be the butt of yet another joke?”

“It’s not a joke. It’s a surprise.” Even through his fury, Severus could see Sirius was disappointed and maybe a little hurt. His anger retreated, leaving the embarrassment surging higher than before.

“You still should’ve told me. I looked stupid.”

“To who? Some professors and little kids? What do they matter?”

“Easy for you to say,” Severus said. “Everyone likes you.”

Sirius stared at him and then shook his head. “Can we start over? I stayed here because I wanted to

spend time with you. Let's not fight."

It was possibly the sincerest thing Severus ever heard from Sirius. All the negative things inside him deflated at once, replaced with something warm and kind of glowy.

"Alright," he agreed. "What do you want to do first?"

"Let's go outside," Sirius said.

They returned to their respective common rooms to bundle up and then reunited out in the snow. Sirius built an igloo while Severus mostly watched, lending a hand or spell when Sirius really needed it. When it was done, they crawled inside the snow dome and flopped down onto the packed floor, rolling onto their sides to face each other. Sirius reached out a gloved hand and brushed Severus's snow-dampened hair off his face.

"I fancy you," Severus blurted out. He expected shock, disgust, or rejection.

Sirius smiled and tipped his head so that their foreheads touched. "I'd hope so." Then he kissed Severus like he had dozens of time before. Severus's heart burst into such a rapid beat that he was sure Sirius would feel it through their robes.

"You fancy me too?" he had to ask, mumbling into Sirius's lips.

"Of course I do." Sirius pulled back and studied Severus. "Why else would we be snogging all over the castle?"

"Boredom," Severus answered. Sirius burst out laughing, energetic and unreserved.

"You're ridiculous. Kiss me again."

They stayed curled together for what felt like hours. When Sirius announced he was hungry and began to scoot back outside, part of Severus wanted to grab him and insist he stay. At that moment, they weren't divided by house or blood or class. He was just himself and Sirius was just Sirius. He knew when they stepped back into the castle, it couldn't be that simple anymore.

March 1976

"What are you smiling about?" Lily asked, nudging Severus's knee with her own.

"Am I smiling?" he asked, smoothing his face until it was expressionless.

"Ugh, it's creepy how you do that. It's okay to smile, you know."

"If you say so." Severus tapped the word Lily had circled several times in her notes. "What's Occlumency?"

"Hiding your thoughts," Lily explained, reaching over to point at the bulleted list she'd jotted underneath. "Or controlling them so they can't be found, I suppose. There didn't seem to be much of a consensus on what exactly it is."

"But you think it'll help?"

Lily nodded. "You can't let them know how you really feel. It'd make you a target. Of course, you'd know if they try to really dig around in your head - that's Legilimency - but there are more

subtle things you can guard against even if you don't realize it's happening."

They'd been combing through advanced textbooks and teaching each other the most useful bits for over a year now. The closer it got to OWLs, the harder it was to make time for it, but they managed to set meetings a few times a month between studying frenzies.

"I'll check these out for the summer," Severus said about her list of titles relating to Occlumency.

"Check out," Lily echoed, lifting her fingers to create air quotes.

"I always bring them back and recharm them. That's only borrowing with more steps."

Lily laughed. Severus smiled back, as brightly as he had moments before thinking about Sirius.

His Slytherin year mates had ignored him all year, having bought into John's theory that he was a blood traitor. Even Marceline. She remained pleasant when they passed each other or had to work together in class but she never ate meals with him, walked to class beside him, or chattered about her day.

But he had Lily to study with and Sirius to snog so all things considered, he thought he was doing pretty well.

May 1976

The Great Hall rustled with the sound of hundreds of parchments hurtling across the room and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms.

Severus felt stuffy from the warm room and the mental energy it had taken to write out everything he knew on so many different topics. He tucked his exam paper into his bag and headed outside for fresh air.

Lily fell into step beside him. "How do you think you did?"

"Excellent," he said. "I know you did too."

"I wish I was as confident as you are," she said. "Question fifteen—"

"Lily!" Marlene McKinnon, one Gryffindor among a gaggle, raised her hand and waved Lily over. "I have your Charms notes."

"Oh, I really need those! Sorry, Severus, I'll catch up with you later," she said and drifted over to the group.

Severus walked to the shore of the Great Lake and settled down onto the grass, dropping his bag beside him with a thump. School had never been challenging for him but the OWLs were on another level entirely. Still, he was pretty sure that-

"Oi, Snape!"

Severus tensed at James Potter shouting his name. Years ago, he might have had his wand up and ready quick enough. But it had been so long since the Gryffindors bothered him and Sirius was standing right there. Severus only turned warily.

James looked furious and from the way his eyes kept darting toward the group Lily had gone to, Severus had a good idea why.

“Potter,” he started to say, exasperated with the situation.

“Impedimenta!” The jinx pushed Severus over and down into the ground. The back of his head slammed into the grass. He rolled over and tried to shake his wand out of its pocket but he fumbled with it too long.

“Accio Snape’s wand,” James continued, now only a couple meters away. As his wand soared into James’s hand, Severus tried to stand but the jinx held him firmly down. He looked to Sirius. Sirius looked back unhappily, his deep brown eyes trained on Severus, but stayed silent.

Students closed in from around the grounds. He saw Marceline, Gerald, Evan - all his yearmates stood in one clump and didn’t raise a wand to help him.

“How was your exam?” James asked.

“Give me back my wand and bugger off,” Severus said.

“I don’t think I will,” James said and pointed his wand once more.

“Sirius,” Severus said quietly and was embarrassed by the note of pleading in his own voice. Sirius jumped as though struck and James laughed.

“Great idea. Sirius, the floor is yours.” James stepped back and swept his arm out, as if presenting Severus to Sirius.

If it had happened before winter holidays, Severus would have expected it. It would have hurt; it would have been a betrayal. It wouldn’t have completely shattered his heart.

But winter holidays had happened. Sirius had stayed, he’d spent two weeks kissing Severus and whispering sweet things, and in the months since he’d been just as caring. Only the week before Sirius had Transfigured a desk into a bed and-

“Scourgify,” Sirius said and Severus gagged on the flood of bubbles that erupted in his mouth.

It was a weak thing, child’s play - the spell that broke Severus Snape.

“Have you gone mad?” Lily pushed her way to the front of the crowd, eyes flashing, her own wand drawn and poised to curse.

“Evans,” James said, suddenly calm and pleasant. “How are you?”

“Disgusted,” she snapped and flicked her wand at Severus. The taste of soap left his mouth and he spit the last few suds into the grass before him. The impediment jinx was worn off enough that he was able to climb, unsteadily, to his feet.

Peter watched James, James watched Lily, Lily glared at Sirius, and Sirius looked at his feet.

Severus felt the gaze of every student on the grounds. He saw Kamila watching Lily, grimacing. Evan and John muttered to each other, gesturing between her and Severus. He thought, perhaps oddly, of Tobias.

“I don’t need help from a Mudblood,” he snarled and Lily’s furious gaze snapped to his.

“Be that way then,” she said coldly at the same time that James crowed, “How dare you?”

Lily turned and marched away, her red hair disappearing into the crowd.

James lifted his wand to curse Severus again just as Professor McGonagall stormed through the spectators.

"I've never been this ashamed to have a group of students in my house," she seethed as she escorted the five of them to Professor Dumbledore's office.

The headmaster regarded them one at a time as they stood before his desk.

"You are all less than two years away from being of age," Professor Dumbledore said. "You are all intelligent and talented. You do yourself and the wizarding world at large no favors with these childish antics."

He went on. Severus stopped listening. He kept seeing Sirius standing over him, cursing him. Also Sirius lying next to him, touching his face. Sirius on the playground, Sirius in his room, Sirius laying flowers at Eileen's grave.

"It's my fault," Severus interrupted. Pale blue eyes found his.

"Oh?" Professor Dumbledore asked, gesturing for Severus to continue.

"I challenged Potter to a duel. Then I called someone a, er, Mudblood. It only got out of hand because he was angry on her behalf."

Professor Dumbledore stared at Severus for a very long time.

"Are you sure that's what happened?" he eventually asked.

"Absolutely." Next to him, Remus twitched.

"Then five points each from Gryffindor for use of magic outside the classroom." Peter and Remus had not cast any spells but they did not object. "Mr. Snape, fifty points from Slytherin and you will serve detention each evening, including weekends, until the end of term. We don't tolerate discriminatory behavior or words at Hogwarts." The headmaster looked at each of them once more. "You will go back to your common rooms. This is your last chance to show you can conduct yourselves appropriately."

Professor McGonagall looked as though she strongly disapproved of allowing them to leave without an escort but she stepped aside and they passed through in a single file line.

Out in the corridor, the Gryffindors stopped and not to be cowed, Severus stopped too.

"Why did you cover for us?" James asked suspiciously.

Severus looked only at Sirius as he said, "Whatever punishment they would have given you wouldn't be enough. I'll get my own justice."

Sirius took a step forward. "Listen—" he tried.

Severus turned his back on the lot of them and strode away.

June 1976

Severus sat alone in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, staring out the window at the landscape streaking by. A trio of first years had tried to sit with him but he'd glared so steadily at them that they left after a few minutes, one in tears.

He didn't know what he would do once he got to the station. Eileen always picked him up. He wanted to go to Spinner's End if Tobias was good on his word that he'd never be there. But if he returned home and found his father, in the state he was in, he would probably kill him.

The door to the compartment slid open and Severus glanced over, expecting more students that needed to be scared off.

He turned his head back around, a little too quickly. He'd very intentionally avoided Sirius the last few weeks, even as Sirius waited for him outside lessons and the Slytherin common room. He thought the idiot had finally gotten the message.

Sirius slid the compartment door shut behind him but didn't take a seat. He let the silence stretch on for several moments before clearing his throat. "My parents kicked me out last summer," he said. "I'm going to stay with the Potters this summer. So we won't see each other around town."

So that was why he stayed at Hogwarts. Incredibly, after everything, learning that still sent a stab of pain through Severus. Pain and humiliation - how could he have been so stupid, so deluded, to believe anything Sirius had ever said?

"Are you seriously still mad?" A defensive edge entered his words. "It was a scourge for fuck's sake. It's not like I hurt you. What was I supposed to do? Tell James, 'Sorry, can't curse him, we've been snogging like mad.'"

"You could have," Severus said, breaking his self-imposed silence. He'd had dreams about that exact thing. Sirius dropping his wand, shouting for everyone to hear that he loved Severus Snape. The dreams felt enjoyable in the moment but they put him in a foul mood most of the morning.

Not that anyone noticed.

"You're a hypocrite," Sirius said. "You weren't exactly eager to tell anyone. You could barely handle being friends with Evans. You know it would have been so much worse if the Slytherins knew about us."

"Well, we don't have to worry about any of that anymore. What a relief. You can leave now."

"I can't." Sirius took another step forward. "I can't start summer holidays with things like this. You know that I—"

As Sirius spoke, he lifted a hand, moving to touch Severus's cheek. Severus met his gaze and cut him off with a slash of his wand and a single word.

"Sectumsempra." It was a spell he had developed over the past year, inspired by his work with Lily but he'd yet to share it with her. Now he never would.

The spell only grazed Sirius's bicep, as Severus intended. Sirius jerked back and hissed in pain. Even with just the edge of the spell, the sleeve of his Muggle shirt split neatly and underneath that so did layers of flesh. Blood poured from the wound. It soaked his sleeve and dripped down to coat his forearm.

"What the hell was that?" Sirius asked, scrambling for his own wand.

"You will never touch me again." Severus turned away, dismissing Sirius but gripping his wand tightly in case a counterattack came.

There was none. Sirius muttered a wound closing spell and then yanked the compartment door

open. Only once he slammed it shut behind him could Severus relax.

The rest of the train ride was uneventful. Severus waited patiently until he was sure most of the others had disembarked. Then he hefted his bag over his shoulder and stepped out into the train corridor.

After crossing through the brick barrier, Severus walked to the curb and flagged down a cab. He climbed into the backseat and gave the driver the address of Garrison Grocery & More, hoping that Mr. Garrison would cover the fare.

Chapter 8

September 1976 - Sixth Year

Severus discovered on his return to Hogwarts the long-held secret that sixth and seventh year Slytherins had private rooms. His own was small, barely large enough to fit the bed and a wardrobe, but after a summer of solitude he was relieved to not be thrust back into a constant complete lack of privacy. The room even connected to a bath that he shared only with Achilles Mulciber.

He found something else: his yearmates were far more friendly. Knowing that the change came about because he called Lily a Mudblood, his indifference towards them morphed into dislike.

His room became his instant refuge. He left only to attend classes and scarf down quick meals in the hall. Other than those times, he stayed in his room, stretching his mind to its limits in silent comfort.

After a few weeks, he began to look for Lily as he stepped into each class they shared. The first time that he saw her sitting next to an empty seat, he sped over and dropped his body in the seat next to her.

As she turned to glare at him, he drew out his wand and cast his newest spell.

“What’s that?” she asked suspiciously as a tiny buzzing noise filled the air around them.

“Muffling spell,” Severus answered. “So we won’t be overheard.”

“I have nothing to say to you.” She folded her arms over her chest and continued to glare.

“Understandable. I want to tell you something and not because I expect forgiveness. I only want you to know.” He wanted to look away then, his mother’s disgust and rejection fresh in his mind. But Lily deserved better. “I was shagging Black.”

It was strange to admit to at all and especially when Sirius sat only a few desks over, arm wrestling James while Peter cheered them on.

“What?” She looked only stunned, not horrified as he’d feared.

“Yeah. Then he hexed me, as you saw. It doesn’t excuse what I did but I hope you realize it’s not that I ever had a problem with you or where you came from.” He hesitated but then let the guard around his last secret fall too. “My dad’s a Muggle.”

There was a very long silence, save the noise of Muffliato. Lily appraised him and he withstood the scrutiny as steadily as he could manage.

“You’ve made quite a mess of things, Severus Snape.”

“I know.” He stood up to find a different vacant seat. “I’m sorry. I won’t bother you again.”

“Oh,” Lily sighed. “Sit down. Stop that awful buzzing while you’re at it. And don’t think I’m letting you off lightly. I expect all the details about you and Sirius later.” She stopped here to glare at the aforementioned Gryffindor. He was rubbing his forearm, pouting, while James clasped both

hands above his head in victory. “He’s horrid. They all are.”

“You’re the best of anyone in this school,” he said. Though she clearly wasn’t ready to completely forgive and forget, she gave him a small smile that suggested one day she might.

October 1976

For the second time since the start of term, Severus stepped into the Hogwarts library. He carried a large canvas tote of borrowed books. He planned to return them and then check out an equal volume, as quickly as possible.

He deposited the books onto the return shelf with no issue but when he turned around, he found Remus Lupin stationed in his path.

Severus yanked his wand out. Remus eyed it warily but didn’t pull his own. “That’s not why I’m here,” he said. “Actually, quite the opposite. I’d like to propose a truce.”

Severus planned to tell Remus to fuck off. Then a wonderfully wicked idea planted itself in his brain. He cleared his throat and said, “We don’t need a truce. You never harmed me.” *Unlike those useless degenerates you call friends...*

“I never helped you either,” Remus said with what seemed to be a great amount of genuine guilt. Severus was a little surprised but mostly amused.

Severus flicked his hands dismissively. “Fine. The truce is established. Now, unless you can help me find Moste Potente Potions—”

“Well, I can,” Remus said with a sly smile. “It’s in the restricted section, though.”

“How did you-? Not that it matters, I suppose. I’ll ask Slughorn for a note next lesson.”

“I’ll get you the book right now.” Remus’s smile grew truly mischievous. Severus always wondered what drew James and Sirius to Remus, quiet and bookish that he was. With Remus smirking at him that way, he began to have a better idea of what the connection might be. “Wait here.”

Severus waited, hovering near the return shelf and watching Remus as he strode up to Madam Pince with a suddenly downtrodden expression. They murmured back and forth, Remus looking at her with a truly piteous stare the entire time, and then she gestured her hands in a very clear, *fine, fine, go ahead*.

Remus walked off to what Severus knew to be the restricted section and returned ten minutes later clutching the book. When Remus held the thickly bound book out, Severus took it, although he didn’t actually need the book at all. He’d memorized all the useful brews by his fifth year and had only tossed out the title to get Remus to go away.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Severus said.

“I’m glad that my - that sometimes I can be useful.” He blushed, hard, when he stumbled over his words.

“I’m sure you have many uses,” Severus drawled and the red spread from Remus’s cheeks to his ears.

Oh, this was going to be a *much* easier revenge than he'd initially suspected.

November 1976

Severus bent forward, placing his elbows on the desk and pressing his hands to his forehead as though he could manually squeeze the pain from his temples. If he wasn't so convinced of the usefulness of Occlumency, he would have ended these lessons weeks ago.

"You've gotten much better," Lily offered, stepping closer. "We should stop for today."

"Not a bad idea," Severus admitted, still holding his head. "I could use a Pepper-up."

"You need Madam Pomfrey?" She rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"No, no. I have some in my room." He stood up and Lily withdrew her hand with a wry smile.

"Right. You and your illicit private stores," she said.

"Going to turn me in?"

"Obviously not. Shall we try again on Friday?"

"I can't," Severus said, trying to sound light but knowing he came off evasive by the way her eyes narrowed.

"I thought you weren't seeing him anymore."

"I'm not seeing him, we just—"

"That is completely hypocritical, Severus. Sirius hid you and used you so you turn around and do the same to his friend? Furthermore—"

"I've heard your feelings on the matter," Severus said as calmly as he could manage given how annoying she was being.

"Saturday, then?" she asked stiffly, still training a reproving glare on him.

"Saturday works," he said.

"Of course it does. Remus will be watching his friends in the Quidditch match."

"Have a good night, Lily," Severus said, overly polite just to irritate her, and stepped out into the corridor.

It had taken a few awkward weeks of negotiating their friendship for things to fall back mostly into place. He'd volunteered several times to write all her homework essays and she'd eventually agreed although she insisted it did nothing to make up for his treatment of her. It was because it was his first strike that she could forgive him, she'd said, but that she also wouldn't give him another one.

Lately he worried she would count him messing with Remus as another strike. He worried even more because that wasn't enough of a reason for him to stop.

Friday night after dinner, he met Remus out on the grounds. It was chilly; they were both wrapped in various robes and coats. Severus had a lot more variety in his clothing since he'd been able to

keep his entire summer paycheck.

Remus always brought the map with him when they met. Severus hoped viciously that it made Sirius suspicious.

Remus kissed him the moment they found cover behind some trees, practically attacking with his lips, pulling Severus close with a surprisingly powerful grip. His tastes jumped from week to week - sometimes he wanted to be held and gently stroked, others he wanted as much heat and friction as possible, and then there were entire weeks where he would lash out if Severus came within a foot of him. The only consistency was that Remus never disrobed, insisting they fumble through pushed aside cloth.

He'd been particularly insatiable the past few days. Severus pulled away when Remus tried to slip a hand into his robes.

"It's too cold for that," Severus complained.

"Let's go inside then." Remus continued pawing almost frantically until Severus, unable to stop him another way, grabbed his wrists and squeezed, just short of tight enough to be painful. Remus's head snapped up and he stared into Severus's eyes, startled and slightly afraid.

Severus thought it might be the same look he'd have if Tobias showed up and grabbed him. He yanked his hands away and took several steps back, a wave of revulsion surging in him.

"Sorry," they said at the same time and Remus cracked a small smile. Severus couldn't bring himself to show any mirth, even forced.

He forgot, often, about Remus's long sleeves and frequent disappearances. When he did remember, he hated himself for choosing Remus as his vehicle for revenge.

He did like Remus, in his own way. He would never complain about the sex, or the rare evenings they spent completing homework in companionable silence, or the times Remus would catch his eye across the room and smile, completely unconcerned with who saw.

So he did like Remus, sometimes an awful lot. But nowhere near as much as he hated Sirius. That was what it always came down to.

May 1977

When a letter arrived with the morning's post asking Severus to meet Remus at midnight at a new spot he'd discovered, his first reaction was to send his own note back refusing. He hadn't served detention the entire year and he wasn't particularly eager to do so again.

He looked across the Great Hall and found Remus, sitting next to Peter and across from James, staring down into his porridge and looking miserable. His always pale skin looked even more lifeless than usual and when he lifted his head to smile blandly at something James was saying, his eyes were puffy and rimmed with purple.

He glanced back down at the letter - *Take the stick and poke the knot at the base of the Whomping Willow. Then walk until you find me.* That didn't sound too difficult. Detention was not really too bad either. A few hours wasted scrubbing cauldrons suddenly sounded better than disappointing Remus when he looked like he'd just survived a run in with a Chimera.

That night Severus stayed in his room meditating until the alarm spell he'd cast alerted him it was

time to leave. Then he prowled through the castle and out onto the grounds, thankfully without a single Filch run in.

There was a large stick waiting beside the Whomping Willow just as Remus wrote. By the light of Lumos, Severus searched the base of the tree until he found a sizable knot and then, hunkering down to avoid the angry branches, he raced to it and jammed the stick into it.

Instantly the tree lost all its fury. In the same moment Severus hesitated. He'd much rather be in his room. He could easily turn around and tell Remus he'd accidentally fallen asleep.

Maybe it would be better to go back and make no excuses. Maybe it would irritate Remus for once, crack that calm and soothing exterior, show that he wasn't perfect deep down inside. Maybe Remus would end the farce before he had to. He'd never intended this entanglement to go on as long as it had.

Despite his misgivings, Severus ducked through the opening beneath the knot.

He found a long, dark passage. He lifted his lit wand to peer into the blackness. There were other footsteps pressed into the dirt of the tunnel, so many overlapping that he could only pick out pieces of each print. It couldn't be such a secret place, then, after all.

As he approached the end of the tunnel, Severus thought he could hear some echoing thuds coming from the start of the passage. He paused, listening hard, but there were no voices to accompany the sounds. Perhaps an animal walking on the grass above.

Finally he came to a stop at a stepladder leading to a trapdoor. Were the echoes getting louder? Severus reached up to flip the door open and found it locked. A simple *Alohamora* took care of that and Severus pushed it open.

Several things happened at once. He felt a sharp, fierce pain in his ankle at the exact moment something heavy dropped onto his right arm. He turned and had just enough time to take in dilated yellow eyes, gray matted fur, and rows of jagged slobbery teeth. Then he was dragged downward.

He fell off the ladder and landed face down onto the dirt with a thump. He managed to get his elbows under him and pushed up slowly, terrified of what might be in the tunnel after what he'd just seen.

James Potter and Peter Pettigrew stood side by side, eyeing him warily.

"You - but - werewolf!" Severus sputtered, adrenaline spiking now that he knew he was safe.
"Remus is in there!"

"How do you know that?" Peter asked. Severus felt odd to be spoken to like a human and not a bug about to be squished beneath a heel. But none of that mattered then.

"Did you hear me? Remus told me to meet him there. We h-have to get h-help." Severus began to shiver and his teeth chattered, causing him to stumble on his words.

"Remus is fine," James said.

Severus seized on those words and finally allowed himself to relax. It was only then that he realized his ankle stung and his arm burned. He looked at his arm - his robes were shredded and sliced skin lay exposed between the strips of fabric.

A new panic set in. Had he been bitten by the werewolf? The marks looked more like scratches.

Werewolf scratches didn't turn people, he was fairly certain of that. He needed to get to the hospital wing and confirm.

James pointed his wand at the trap door and muttered, "Colloportus. We'd better get out of here."

Severus didn't have the strength to argue. The three of them made the trek back in silence. It was only when they climbed out of the tree and made it safely away from its reach that James turned and asked, "Why would Remus want to meet you?"

Severus looked at him and said nothing.

"It wasn't Remus, anyway," James continued heavily. "It was Sirius."

It was Sirius.

It was Sirius.

"It was Sirius?" Severus echoed, feeling as though moving his lips to speak required Herculean amounts of strength. Sirius sent him to be mauled to death by a werewolf. Even after everything, this new depth of depravity shocked him. Was Sirius pure evil? How had he missed it?

"I don't know why," James said. "He's gone mad, clearly. But—" he hesitated here and shared an indecipherable look with Peter, "you can't tell anyone. You...are friends with Remus, right? That's why you were trying to see him?"

"We've been having sex," Severus said, bluntly, because nothing mattered anymore. He barely noticed the extreme reactions that passed over both of their faces.

"Oh," Peter said in a strangled, high-pitched voice.

"Then you really can't tell," James said, "because that was Remus."

Severus blinked. "What was?" Both boys stared at him, wearing matching slightly pitying expressions. Severus looked back down at his arm. "The...werewolf? Remus is a werewolf?"

Severus thought of the red-tinged yellow eyes and the guttural snarl only inches away. He felt like he might be sick.

He took a deep, steady breath. Then he buried it all. Using the Occlumency he'd practiced all year, he sorted his emotions and thoughts, categorized and stored them, and sealed the mental boxes shut.

"I'm going to Professor Dumbledore," Severus said fiercely. "No, he won't do anything. I'm going to the Minister! Sirius Black is a menace. He should be expelled for what he did. And the werewolf! He almost killed me."

"The werewolf?" James grimaced. "You mean Remus."

"I'm done speaking to you," Severus spat and turned to go back into the castle. But James's next words froze him where he stood.

"You owe me."

"Excuse me? What exactly do I owe you after years of bullying and torment?" Peter did not seem to understand where this was going any better than Severus. He stood off to the side, looking between the two of them and wringing his hands fretfully.

"As if you didn't hex me right back," James said dismissively. "But you do owe me. I saved your life."

"A life debt." James nodded. "To be dismissed if I keep your pet's secret."

"He's not - but yes. Professor Dumbledore said he could be killed if he ever hurt a student. So you save his life and vow not to tell, and I'll forgive the debt." He spoke calmly, reasonably. Severus wanted to strangle the life out of him.

"Fine," Severus ground out.

"Peter? Would you mind?"

James held out his hands and Severus took them, lip curled in disgust. Their fingers linked in contrasting stripes of pale and dark, like his and Sirius's had only a year earlier.

The similarity fed Severus's anger. The fury bubbled away inside him as he swore the Unbreakable Vow to never reveal Remus Lupin as a werewolf.

"Reveal means tell someone that doesn't know," James added at the end. "You can talk to us about it."

Severus snatched his hands back as he asked, "Why would you think I'd ever want to do that?"

"I'm hoping one day you might find a little humanity," James said. "Maybe feel a little guilt about calling your boyfriend *the werewolf*."

"He was never my boyfriend," Severus snapped.

No one said anything for a minute. Eventually Peter cleared his throat. "We should get going before someone catches us."

"Good idea," James said and withdrew the map and a silvery cloak from his robe. Then he paused as if he just remembered they had an audience. "Need anything else, Snape?"

Severus walked away without another word.

His ankle protested each step. As soon as he collapsed onto his bed, he pulled his boots and socks off to inspect it. It was sprained, perhaps, bruised, swollen, and generally pitiful to look at but he had full motion of his toes. There were two large circular wounds, one on his ankle and one further up on his leg. It looked like something sharp had punctured the skin. He couldn't figure out where they would have come from. He cast two rounds of Episkey on his ankle and it appeared good as new with only a slight soreness when he rotated his foot.

He took a shower then and carefully washed the cuts on his arm. They were not particularly deep and already starting to scab over. After the shower he rubbed healing salve into them.

He slept a few hours, fitfully, and skipped breakfast. In Arithmancy, his first class of the day, he was pulled out by Madam Pomfrey who escorted him to Professor Dumbledore's office.

"Have a seat, please," Professor Dumbledore said, very gravely. Severus took the last open seat next to Peter, carefully avoiding everyone's eyes. "I assume you know what this is about, and that you must not repeat any of this to anyone."

"Black tried to kill me," Severus said flatly. Sirius snorted in his chair.

"This is no laughing matter," Professor Dumbledore said, aiming a piercing stare directly at him.
"You almost cost two lives last night, including someone I always thought to be your close friend."

"Two lives?" Sirius spoke roughly, anger stabbing through each word. "No way that greasy snake would have killed Remus."

"The Ministry would have."

There was a very long, completely silent pause. Severus snuck a glance at Sirius and thrilled at the dawning devastation on his face.

"I didn't think about that," Sirius muttered.

"It's very obvious that you didn't think at all."

"Well, when I found out—" Sirius cut himself off mid-sentence.

"Found out what?" Professor Dumbledore pressed but Sirius shook his head. "I will be honest with you, Mr. Black. This conversation is your only chance at escaping expulsion. If you are not willing to engage, if I don't see true remorse—"

"He fucked my best mate!" Sirius was out of his seat then, pointing a finger at Severus. "Did you know that? Out of the entire castle, he picked Remus! That wasn't an accident." He turned and sent a very ugly look Severus's way. "I know you, you conniving shit."

Peter and James exchanged a look of confusion at the extreme reaction. Severus felt a stab of ugly satisfaction that Sirius was coming off as even more unhinged since no one knew their history.

"What a stunning display of remorse," he said. He was thankful that he'd buried the part of him that would be devastated to know how deeply Sirius hated him.

He couldn't admit he'd burned himself in his quest for vengeance.

"You shut UP!" Sirius moved toward him, maybe to hit him, but James jumped up and grabbed his arm.

"You've done enough," James said firmly and shoved Sirius back down into his chair.

"What if I want Sirius expelled?" Remus asked quietly.

The explosive friction drained out of the room and left in its place a quiet tension.

"Remus..." It was Sirius again. "I am sorry, mate. Like I said, I didn't think anything would happen to you. I would never have sent Snape if I did."

"You did think, Sirius. You thought you'd use me as a weapon. Did you ever consider how I'd feel, after I'd killed someone? When you know how much that thought haunts me. And you did it because I told you that Severus and I - you *knew* that and you sent him to be torn apart by me anyway?" Remus's voice rose and broke so many times during his speech that by the end he was only whispering, clutching his armrests and staring down at the floor. "So, Professor Dumbledore. What if I want Sirius expelled?"

"Unfortunately Mr. Lupin, that power does not lie with you. You are right to feel exactly as you do but I have to consider all options from every angle." Professor Dumbledore looked at each boy in turn. "Although, I have spent the past nearly six years trying to lessen the animosity between you

all. I confess I don't see many more options. Expulsion would be a very minimal punishment for what you did. Mr. Black."

"What if I take responsibility?" James asked. "I'll keep Sirius in line. No more harassing Snape, no more pranks or sneaking out or any of that. I'll keep him away from you too, Remus, if that's what you want."

"I think being Potter's property would be a reward, not a punishment," Severus cut in.

"I hate you," Sirius said, though with much less venom than his earlier speech.

"Hush," James instructed curtly and Sirius, after a moment of sputtering mutiny, did. "Professor?"

There was the longest pause yet. Severus was unsurprised when Professor Dumbledore inclined his head. He didn't bother complaining. He'd known Sirius would get away with it from the moment he'd taken the Vow with James.

"Mr. Black. This is your absolute last chance. If I hear you so much as dropped a dungbomb in class, you will be expelled immediately. I implore you to rely on Mr. Potter. He may be the only person left willing to act in your best interest."

Professor Dumbledore assigned Sirius detention with the headmaster himself for the rest of term and then dismissed them all.

Out in the corridor, Remus called his name and Severus paused, very conscious of their audience of three. "Did you - can we talk?" Remus asked. He looked even worse than the morning before - exhausted and abused inside and out. The sight no longer stirred pity in him. All Severus saw when he looked at him was that snarling beast.

"I don't believe we have anything to talk about," Severus said coldly.

"Oh," Remus said, so softly that Severus barely caught the word. "Alright."

Severus went back to class. He did his work, he took notes, he submitted assignments. The entire time his mind chanted, on an endless loop in James's voice, *It was Sirius*.

June 1977

"Lily, please."

"I don't ever want to talk to you again, Severus."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Lily's voice became screechy with indignation. "You are a terrible person, that's why not. You like to play the innocent victim - well, I think you deserve everything you get. Poor Remus - you broke his heart and you don't even feel badly about it."

"You don't know everything," Severus said stiffly, smarting from Lily's verbal attack.

"I know plenty! James told me -"

"Oh, because Potter's so perfect. As if he didn't hex me every chance he got."

"Years ago," Lily snapped. "We were kids. And at least James was mature enough to put this

stupid rivalry behind him! If you were in his shoes you'd have let him walk to his death."

Severus didn't argue. He was fairly certain she was right on the last part. Besides that, he could see her mind was made up. He'd spent the past few weeks pleading for her forgiveness and in that moment, he was sick of it.

"Fine," Severus said and took a step away, towards the compartment door. "I don't need you."

"Oh, yes you do," Lily said with a cruel little laugh. "You had Sirius and he was ashamed of you. You had Remus and he was too good for you. You had me and I've outgrown you. Now you have no one."

Severus suddenly and intensely understood Sirius tricking him into going to the werewolf. He would have happily tossed Lily to a pack of them in that moment.

"Go to hell."

"You first!" She shot him a rude gesture.

Severus slammed the compartment door on his way out.

Chapter 9

July 1977

Severus slouched into Mr. Garrison's office. It hadn't changed much in the years he worked there. It contained a sturdy wooden desk with a folding metal chair on either side and some filing cabinets. Papers were usually strewn across the desk's surface and a telephone perched precariously next to a framed photo of Mr. Garrison's wife and children.

Severus hovered next to the chair facing the desk and Mr. Garrison, who'd called him into his office, sat behind it. He steepled his thick fingers and regarded Severus thoughtfully.

"You've having a tough time," he said.

"I'm alright."

"I've known you since before you went through puberty." Mr. Garrison grinned and thumbed his mustache. "You're not doing great, kid."

Severus loathed being called kid. He hated the cramped office. He detested the stupid smirk the dumb Muggle was giving him. He wanted to crawl out of his own skin and fly away to somewhere less miserable.

That used to be Hogwarts. Now he dreaded returning.

"I quit," Severus said and stood up. Mr. Garrison stayed in his seat.

"You quit, do you?"

Severus untied his apron, compressed it into a ball, and slapped it down onto the desk. A few papers fluttered down onto the linoleum floor.

"I quit," Severus repeated.

"Take a seat, boy." Severus did. "What's the matter? Haven't seen you this torn up since your mother passed away. Tobias hasn't been coming around, has he? Did something happen at that school of yours?"

Images blurred through Severus's mind like they had so many times in his life. Remus under him, grinning, reaching to pull Severus down into a kiss. Sirius yelling *I hate you* in the headmaster's office. Lily teasing him about showing off for using a spell to cut his sandwich. Sirius pointing his wand and casting scourgify. His mother hugging him and warning him not to send owls. Sirius passing a chocolate frog and a jar of healing salve through his cracked window.

Severus leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees and wept.

Mr. Garrison let him stay until he'd calmed down. He served him several cups of tea, darting out to deal with grocery business but coming back to check up on him. He brought a package of handkerchiefs and a chocolate bar and pressed both into Severus's hand.

"You're a good kid," Mr. Garrison said. Severus knew he was wrong. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, won't I?"

Severus shrugged, knowing he would come back, and walked out of the store.

When he unlocked his front door and pushed it open, he found Sirius leaning against the half-wall that divided the kitchen from the sitting room, twirling his wand.

Severus cursed himself for leaving his wand upstairs - but he couldn't do magic in the streets of Spinner's End; there were too many Muggles. He didn't think he'd have need of his wand so far from school.

"Come to kill me?" Severus asked dully. He chose not to give Sirius the satisfaction of excitement.

"I should." Sirius dragged his gaze over Severus brazenly. "You ruined my life."

"I - what?"

"Remus won't talk to me. James does but it's like he's my mum, not my mate. Peter's a bootlicker as usual but unsurprisingly that doesn't make me feel any better."

"And I caused any of that, how?"

Sirius crossed the room in a few quick strides. He stood a head taller than Severus and cut an intimidating figure as he grabbed Severus by the collar of his Muggle shirt.

"You should've forgiven me for the fucking Scourgify." Up close and so deranged, he didn't look very handsome. "You shouldn't have fucked Remus."

That was a lie. He was still the most beautiful creature Severus had ever seen.

"I'm not sorry," Severus said. It thrilled him to see how his words only incensed Sirius further.

"I hate you. I hate you so fucking much."

"I hate you too."

Sirius dragged Severus forward, closing the gap between them, and then bent down to kiss him.

It was every vitriolic thought they'd had about each other pressed into one touch. It was fury and dislike and regret all rolled into the heat between their lips.

Sirius pulled away. Severus let out a little gasp of disappointment but by the time the inhale finished, Sirius was back, nipping along Severus neck hard enough that it hurt, it *hurt* and Severus dragged his hands through Sirius's hair to urge him on for more.

"I hate you," Sirius said again as he yanked Severus up the stairs. He said it so many times in the bedroom that it lost meaning; it became a prayer to their worship on Severus's thin and lumpy mattress.

"You don't really hate me, do you?" Severus asked pathetically when they were done and laid next to each other in the bed. Sirius turned his head and wiped droplets of sweat onto the sheets. Then he climbed on top of Severus, straddling him, and pulled his wrists above his head in a painfully tight grip.

"I really do," Sirius growled into his ear. "I know you don't. You're obsessed with me, always have been. If I snapped my fingers you'd come running, begging for it. Wouldn't you?"

Severus didn't deny it. He didn't try to pull away. He knew the self-loathing would crash over him

the moment Sirius left. But it wasn't that moment yet. So he laid still under Sirius's weight. He admired his lean muscles and the beginnings of a thick beard. He noticed Sirius had grown a considerable spread of chest hair since they'd last seen each other undressed. Sirius smelled the same; he felt entirely different.

"Why did you come here?" Severus whispered.

Sirius let go of his hands. He rolled off of Severus and slid off the bed, bending to retrieve his robes. He looked at Severus as he dressed.

"To prove that I could. Now I know how pathetic you are, how pathetic you'll always be. I tried to kill you and you still let me fuck you."

"You didn't have to kiss me." For a second, Severus thought he saw his old friend flicker to life. There was something gentle, maybe even tender in his face. There was a healthy amount of regret. But then the cold fury crashed back down and Severus couldn't tell if there had ever really been anything else.

Sirius shrugged. "No. I didn't."

He left. Severus laid naked on the bed for a long, long time. He didn't want to move and continue a life where he was, as always, in love with and rejected by Sirius Black.

December 1977 - Seventh Year

The Potions lab was a quiet, studious place when the handful of NEWT students worked within its walls. Often, Severus regretted returning to Hogwarts and wished he'd signed up for homeschooling like he'd claimed his father had all those years ago. But then he put on a pair of freshly laundered robes, or took a shower in perpetually warm water, or ate a well-cooked free meal, and he knew he'd made the correct choice.

It helped that he only had to make it one more year.

He spent the first month of term in solitude, surrounded by students but always alone. Then one day someone tapped his shoulder. He lifted his head from where he was scrawling notes in his textbook to find Marceline, smiling tentatively down at him.

"May I sit here?" she asked, indicating the empty seat next to him.

Severus was exhausted by socializing and probably would be for the rest of his life. He shrugged and went back to the potion.

Marceline sat next to him that day, and the next and the next. In other classes she would sit with friends, whisper over their Transfiguration projects, laugh at their miscasts and clumsiness, and smirk at their accomplishments. In potions, she always sat with Severus.

Eventually her polite comments - "That's so clever, crushing instead of dicing." - turned into small talk about professors and assignments. That led to Marceline including him in gossip about the staff, the school, and eventually the students.

Soon it was almost like first year all over again. Marceline kept him company in the hall and at meals, filling his head with companionable talk while he said very little. He was surprised that after everything he still enjoyed being around her.

Spending time with Marceline meant being around her friends, Freya and Kamila. Kamila was dating Gerald Avery so they tended to stick together and the other boys would often pop over if Gerald was around.

Quickly Severus became deeply entwined with Slytherin house, always invited to a flying scrimmage or chess match or study session. At first he refused all offers but eventually accepted a few, one at a time. He found himself having fun, as unbelievable as it felt sometimes. He'd thought he was too hardened and scarred to enjoy school frivolities but he was proven wrong time and time again.

In class and in the corridors, he studiously ignored the Gryffindors that plagued his past. Thankfully, James seemed true to his word and kept Sirius on a tight leash. He didn't even clown around in class anymore. He talked to James, Peter, and Remus - they'd made up, apparently - and that was it. He'd even quit the Quidditch team, although Severus didn't know how voluntary that was.

Every once in a while, Severus would glance up and find Sirius staring at him from across the hall. Then Severus would make an excuse to his housemates and wander off into an empty classroom. Sirius would always find him even though he never had the map anymore. Severus guessed James wouldn't let him and that probably had something to do with why Sirius was always so rushed.

They would fuck, as quickly as Sirius could manage, and then exit the classroom and take off in opposite directions. The only words that ever passed between them were of the necessary variety - no, yes, and ouch were some of the most common.

One afternoon right before winter holidays they stepped out into the corridor to find James, arms crossed over his chest, map scrunched up in one fist.

"You promised not to fight him anymore," James said to Sirius in a low voice.

Sirius looked ashamed, staring down at his own feet like a chastised child. "I know, I know, but..." Sirius looked at Severus. His face smoothed into neutrality. "I know. You're right. We'll - I'll stop."

Sirius left, trailing behind James. That was the last time he looked at Severus within the walls of Hogwarts.

March 1978

"I'll let you in on a secret," Evan Rosier said. Then he paused and swirled his elf wine for dramatic effect.

"Go on, then," Achilles called and similar shouts of encouragement went up.

Severus sat in a plush chair in the Slytherin common room among the rest of his housemates, clutching a glass that he hadn't even sipped from.

It was nearly commonplace now, this ritual. As soon as someone turned seventeen, the next Hogsmeade weekend they'd return to the castle all smug. Evan was the latest.

"Alright," Evan said in a show whisper. He set his glass down on the coffee table and slowly rolled up his left sleeve.

He revealed the symbol Severus expected: a skull with a snake for a tongue was stamped on his

light brown skin. As Severus watched, the snake undulated, waving back and forth from the open jaw.

Severus was the only of-age person that didn't have the Mark. They'd pestered him, at first, but good-naturedly. He'd evaded them often enough without alienating them that they eventually left it alone.

"Striking," purred Bonnie Winslow, his girlfriend. She reached out and stroked his forearm with firm, slow movements.

"You two," Marceline said, mockingly sharp. "Take that elsewhere, please. There are children present." She smiled impishly as she gestured at John Wilkes.

"I like that!" John swatted her gently on the shoulder and she giggled.

Bored and slightly nauseated by the flirting, Severus took his first sip of the wine. It went down smoothly, nothing like the Firewhiskey that Achilles smuggled back the last Hogsmeade trip.

"What was it like?" Kamila asked. Someone always did.

"Agonizing," Evan said bluntly. "I swear he casts the Cruciatus Curse at the same time."

"Hurt like a bitch," John affirmed.

"I didn't think it was too bad," Freya said lightly. "Men are such babies."

The banter continued but Severus zoned out. He took a few more drinks of wine. He felt cozy and content as he had most of the year. The Slytherins didn't get under his skin the way some other people had, or even the way they themselves had years ago. They were content to let him exist among them just as he was.

Severus abruptly started paying attention again when he heard *Mudblood Evans*.

"-dating a Pureblood, it's rather embarrassing." Freya was talking, pink cheeked and holding what Severus thought might be her fourth or fifth glass. "Of course, the Potters are blood traitors so it's no surprise. But you'd think he'd at least pick a half-blood."

It wasn't news to Severus. He'd seen them hugging in the corridors and snogging on the grounds. It still stung every time. He'd been cast aside and derided; James Potter got strung up as a bloody hero and dated.

The glass in his hand shattered. Someone squealed as shards flew across the room.

"Sorry," Severus apologized hurriedly and pulled out his wand. With the help of several others, the glass was cleaned up within minutes. "Just the mention of mixed dating. My disgust got away from me."

If they doubted his lie, they didn't show it.

"Was that accidental magic?" Marceline asked with a note of admiration. "Only really powerful wizards display accidental magic after childhood."

"We all know Snape's really powerful," John said and Severus turned at the perceived sarcasm, ready to throw back an insult. He was stunned into silence at the sincerity on John's face and the way everyone around him was nodding and murmuring agreement.

"Thank you," he said eventually when no one else seemed poised to speak. He felt his own cheeks coloring.

"Only speaking the truth," John said with a shrug. He pulled out his wand and conjured a new glass goblet which he filled generously with the elf wine. He passed it over to Severus with a smile. "Cheers."

June 1978

Severus rode the Hogwarts Express for the final time in a full compartment. Marceline alternated between cuddling and snogging John while Kamila and Freya discussed summer plans. Achilles staked a window seat and quickly fell asleep with his forehead smushed into the glass.

When the train came to a stop, Marceline came over and hugged him tightly. "I'm thankful we reconnected this year," she said. "I hope we see each other often."

Severus hadn't landed an internship or advanced study program; he hadn't applied for any. He had no plans for the future at all, magical or Muggle. Seeing as how he had no money, his only option was to return to Spinner's End and work for Mr. Garrison to try and pay off the back taxes on the house.

So he didn't see himself seeing much, if any, of Marceline.

There was a flurry of goodbyes at the station, hugs and shoulder pats and cheek kisses all around. Eventually the group dispersed and Severus stepped up to the curb to flag a taxi.

A car pulled up in front of him, shiny black and brand-new looking. The back window rolled down smoothly and Lucius Malfoy's blond head dipped out.

"Need a ride?" he asked, smirking.

Severus remembered Lucius's disappointment when he hadn't jumped at the chance to deride Muggles. He remembered forearms marked with magical tattoos. He remembered *Mudblood* and *half-blood* and *blood traitor*. He remembered countless hours with Lily, preparing to combat this exact moment.

He remembered his father, beating him and his mother. He remembered the dumb bullies at school and their cruel parents. He remembered stabbings on the news, bombings and car crashes and missing children.

He remembered the Slytherins praising him, respecting him, including him. He remembered the powerful thrill the first time he cast a spell in Sirius's bedroom.

He remembered Sirius, which he always hated to do.

"Yes," Severus said and walked around to open the door on the other side.

Chapter 10

December 1978

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named: Friend or Foe?

Heath Neuman, Daily Prophet

There has been much discussion of late about this powerful man, and his small band of like-minded friends. Critics decry him as a violent mad-man but supporters are finally beginning to speak up.

“He’s allowed to have an opinion, isn’t he?” said a well-groomed witch in Knockturn Alley who failed to identify herself. “Is it so terrible to think wizards shouldn’t live in fear of Muggles?”

She references, of course, the 1692 International Statute of Secrecy upon which most of current wizarding society is built. Yet You-Know-Who envisions a different community where this secrecy has ended. In his ideal world, wizards have the power and Muggles defer to our judgment.

Still, there are those who continue to argue against him.

“I can’t trust anyone who won’t share his name,” said Mundungus Fletcher, between hiccoughs outside a pub.

“Er, no, I don’t have a problem with the statute of secrecy,” admitted a flustered Arthur Weasley, Improper Use of Magic employee, before ducking into the Ministry of Magic

While some wizards may be content to spend their lives fearfully hiding, this reporter wonders if there isn’t a better life awaiting us.

June 1979

Terrorists Attack Diagon Alley

Laila Porter, Daily Prophet

Late Saturday afternoon, a group of masked extremists attacked Diagon Alley. Four shoppers were killed and a further twenty-seven are receiving care in St. Mungo’s.

The so-called “Death Eaters” left a manifesto tacked to the door of Quality Quidditch Supplies, published below, and cast their skull-and-snake symbol into the sky above the shopping streets.

Diagon Alley is closed until Tuesday morning, giving time for the Ministry to implement stringent security measures.

December 1979

Enrollment Down at Hogwarts

Laila Porter, Daily Prophet

With the spate of terrorist attacks our communities have experienced over the past year, more and more families are choosing to keep their children away from any conflict.

While there has yet to be an attack at the school, the Death Eaters made clear their intention to gain control in a recent letter to the editor, published in last week's newspaper. Their representative shared their determination to wrest young minds away from the "Muggle-loving leadership" of Albus Dumbledore.

Dumbledore declined to comment.

In a prepared statement read to the press, lame duck Minister Minchum insisted that Hogwarts is among the safest places in all of the United Kingdom and requested parents return their children to school after winter holidays.

January 1980

Severus never celebrated his birthday. When he was very young, Eileen would wake him with a snuggle and whisper into the top of his head, "happy birthday." That was as far as it went.

He knew other people did; he'd been subjected to countless examples over the years. First there were the Muggle children whose parents sent in cupcakes for the class and grinned stupidly while the class sang happy birthday. In Hogwarts, birthdays were usually marked by packages in the post and especially obnoxious children might hit their friends with some kind of attention-drawing charm, songs played on loop or sporadically tossed confetti.

The Death Eaters celebrated their birthdays too, with dinner parties and excessive alcohol. In the nearly two years since he'd joined, Severus had not thrown a party for any occasion and especially would not for something as trivial as his birthday. Lucius prodded, many times - "The Manor is made to host," was an oft repeated refrain. Severus refused.

He refused a lot as a Death Eater; in fact, he said no every chance he got. Probably because he didn't get many chances.

The night of his twentieth birthday, Severus decided to throw his own little party where he would be the guest of honor and sole attendee. He didn't enjoy being around the Death Eaters, not even the ones he'd considered his friends in his final year at school. When he saw them, he saw the horrible things they'd all done together. So he looked at them as infrequently as possible.

Severus Apparated to Muggle London and wandered around until he found a bakery. It was remarkable to him how the Muggles could be so close to losing a war and yet their daily life was barely changed. Unlike the wizarding world, no one here traveled in packs, shoulders hunched and hoods drawn, weapons drawn and poised for the first hint of trouble.

Severus purchased a cupcake - red velvet with cream cheese frosting because it was the last one in the case - and ate it as he strolled the darkened streets. The cupcake was slightly stale and too sweet. He tossed the remaining half of it into a bin on a street corner.

He walked further. The light washed Muggle jeans that he kept hidden in the back of his wardrobe were tighter fitting than he remembered jeans being in his youth. Each step constricted and then released his thigh within the denim.

Severus eventually stopped once more, this time in front of a pub with doors thrown wide open. He couldn't begin to guess how many times he'd stood outside this pub in various Muggle disguises.

He'd never gone inside. He hadn't intended to when the night began but standing there, watching as always, he found himself stepping forward.

Sirius Black sat in a corner booth, his usual spot. A brunette woman sat across from him, laughing, her fingers held up to form a square through which Sirius kept trying to flick little balls of paper.

He looked beautiful as ever. His long sleeves were haphazardly pushed back, exposing bronze forearms, and strands of black escaped from behind his ears to dangle in his face. He was smiling, laughing, happy in a way Severus hadn't been in years.

"You're not very good at this," Severus could hear her say, even through the droning buzz of pub conversations and drink orders, because he was listening so intently.

"You've got me there." Sirius abandoned the paper and picked up the beer bottle before him. He took a long drink without removing his gaze from the woman. "I have other talents, though."

"Parroting cliches being one of them?" she asked, smirking.

"Get you anything?" the bartender asked in a loud, carrying voice. Severus realized only then that he'd taken a seat at the bar.

"Er-"

"Don't serve him," came a low voice from his right. "He's known to run out on a tab."

The bartender shot a very ugly look at Severus and then said to Sirius, "Thanks for the tip."

Severus didn't resist when Sirius grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the pub. He did look at the woman sitting in the booth and took a ridiculous pride in the confusion playing on her face.

Sirius pulled him into a side alley and slammed him into the brick wall, drawing his wand and shoving it painfully into Severus's neck. "I should kill you right here," Sirius growled.

"Go on," Severus said flatly. "You'll never get another easy shot like this."

Severus didn't know how long Sirius kept him like that, wand at his throat, rasping breaths into the otherwise silent cold night.

Then Sirius backed up. "I can't. Even though you deserve it." He lowered his wand. "Get out of here."

"No," Severus said and took a step closer to Sirius.

Pure loathing flashed in Sirius's eyes but he didn't move away when Severus reached for him. Instead he surged closer, placing a hand where his wand had just been.

"You're a piece of shit," Sirius said into Severus's mouth.

"I know."

"I still hate you so much."

"I know."

"Do you know how many of my friends are dead because of you?"

“None.”

Sirius paused where he’d been biting rough marks into Severus’s chest - he’d lost his shirt along the way and wasn’t even sure how - and pulled back.

“Bullshit,” Sirius spat. “I’m going to fuck you; you don’t have to lie.”

“I’m not lying,” Severus said. “I haven’t killed anyone. I barely leave Malfoy Manor. They have me brewing Potions and inventing spells.”

“And what do you think they use those potions and spells for, you dumb bastard?”

“I know.”

Sirius did fuck him, as brutally as the time in Spinner’s End. Severus remembered each word Sirius spat at him that day; even three years later, they played like a record most nights as he struggled to sleep. He heard them then, too, on his hands and knees in a filthy Muggle alley, Sirius’s hands in his hair and breath on the back of his neck.

Sirius ripped himself away as soon as he finished and hurriedly tugged his Muggle clothes back on. Severus reached for his but Sirius kicked them away.

“Wait til I’m gone,” he said. “I don’t want you to follow me.”

“Can I owl you?”

“Merlin, you’re pathetic as always. Why would you want to, Snape? Why do you want any of this? What is wrong with you?”

Severus, sitting naked in front of the person he’d loved probably since he was nine years old, didn’t really feel like pretending. He did it all day every day with the Death Eaters, manipulated them and himself through Occlumency. He was tired, though, and for a moment it all collapsed around him.

Severus shrugged. “I doubt both of us will last the year. Either the Dark Lord will gain full control of the Ministry and you’ll be executed as a blood traitor or he’ll be defeated and I’ll be executed for war crimes.” Now that he had Sirius before him and not just in a dream, he couldn’t seem to stop talking. “I’ve been coming here and watching you, you know. I saw you by chance one day and placed a tracking charm. I already know all the places you go and people you associate with.”

Sirius froze, hands fisted at his side. “You-”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

He laughed now, a harsh, mocking bark. “What do you expect me to say? Thanks for not helping your friends murder me?”

“I thought you should know.”

“You know what’s really pathetic?” Sirius tossed the bundle of clothes to him. Severus shook out his pants and began to put it on. “When I saw you at the bar, I felt relieved. I’ve always wondered if you were dead or not. You’re never at any of the attacks and no one’s seen you since Hogwarts. I’ve been checking the newspaper for your name.”

Severus finished the last button on his shirt and looked up. Sirius was very close again, his dark

eyes wild. He brought his hands up and placed one on each side of Severus's face.

"Why do I want any of this? What's wrong with *me*?"

He kissed Severus again. This time there was no anger in the touch; they could have been fifteen, kissing in the igloo. If only they weren't five years older, five years more bitter, and deeply entrenched in opposing sides of a war.

"I'm sorry," Severus said.

"I'm sorry," Sirius echoed. "I've thought so many times, if I had only done that day after OWLs differently-"

"But you didn't." Severus cut him off. He didn't want to rehash mistakes. He'd made his own. "I have to go. Can I owl you?" he asked again.

Sirius shook his head. "Owls aren't safe," he said.

"So..."

"I'll figure something out. Can you meet me here tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Severus said. He'd only gone out tonight because Lucius and Narcissa had taken a night away in Italy - one of Narcissa's pregnancy symptoms was, apparently, spontaneous travel. He wasn't a prisoner but he wasn't exactly free to go as he pleased. "If I'm not here, maybe every Wednesday we can try? Until we run into each other again."

Sirius agreed and then he was gone. Severus returned to Malfoy Manor and holed away in his room. He spent the night using Occlumency to pack away all the emotions the encounter dredged up. Then he buried them so deeply that even he would have trouble finding them.

Chapter 11

February 1980

Severus reached out and traced the dark scar on Sirius's bicep. It was hypertrophic, a firm bump under his finger. "Why didn't you get rid of this?"

Sirius extended his own hand and trailed four fingers down the white lines on Severus's forearm. "Why didn't you?"

Severus looked down at their entangled limbs. Sirius was pressed up against him with one leg thrown over Severus's left thigh. The edges of the Dark Mark curled around the side of his arm, visible only as chopped black lines and curves.

He moved his hand from the scar to Sirius's hair. Then he threaded his fingers through it and tilted his head up to kiss Sirius, thrilled that it was something he was allowed to do. He did it as often as he could.

"I wanted a reminder to hate you."

He thought Sirius might brush it off or crack a joke. He didn't expect him to tense up as a shadow crossed his face.

"I wish it had worked," Sirius said. "Sometimes I wish you'd never met me."

"I can leave," Severus offered quietly. He didn't want to.

"No, did you hear me? I wish *you* hadn't met *me*. Imagine if you'd met Lily as a kid instead of me."

"She's Muggleborn. Maybe my mum wouldn't have ever told me about Hogwarts then."

"Right. James, then." Sirius nudged Severus's calf with his toes. "Imagine that. You would've wanted to be in Gryffindor. We could've all been friends from the beginning and none of this would've happened."

"I'd meet you a hundred times over before Potter," Severus said. He grabbed Sirius's hands and brought them to his mouth, laying kisses on his fingers. "Let's not do this. We did meet, it did all happen. We should enjoy our time now since one of us will be dead soon." He'd been striving for nonchalance but his voice caught at the end.

Sirius didn't respond immediately. When he did, he touched his own scar and said, "I kept mine for the same reason."

"To remember to hate me?"

"To remember to hate *me*."

Severus didn't know what to say to that. He kissed Sirius again and Sirius drew him closer.

Eventually, they fell asleep.

March 1980

Aberforth Dumbledore met him on the porch of the Hog's Head with gruff disdain. He stared openly at Severus's left arm for a long moment, as though his sleeve would suddenly fall away and reveal the Mark, and then he turned and stumped back into his pub.

"Go on upstairs. There's a bench on the landing. Albus is finishing another interview. He'll come to you when he's done."

There was indeed a small wooden bench which Severus settled on. There were a few rooms down the hallway and by the numbers he guessed them to be rooms for rent. The door directly in front of him was blank and light shone through the cracks around the door. Presumably Albus Dumbledore was inside.

The Dark Lord had summoned him for the first time the week prior. He'd seen the man before but only up close when he received the Dark Mark. The other handful of times it was always from far away during large gatherings. Severus's orders, when he had them, were handed down by someone of a higher rank. Typically it was Lucius since Severus still lived in one of his many guest bedrooms but sometimes it was Bellatrix or John, who'd curried favor quickly despite his young age.

Severus answered the summons, of course, and kneeled at his feet and spoke as little as possible. The Dark Lord praised his service so far and told him to apply for the open position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Severus agreed and then was dismissed.

So nine days later he found himself on a bench awaiting an audience with Dumbledore. The Dark Lord hadn't instructed him to eavesdrop but the clear intention was to gather information on the headmaster. Severus thought maybe he'd hear something harmless that he could pass on to make it clear he was doing everything to help.

There were no eavesdropping spells, per se - he could amplify sounds but that risked someone downstairs overhearing. He could improve his own hearing temporarily but a fly at an inopportune moment would drown out anything useful.

So Severus resorted to Muggle methods. He crept close to the door and pressed his face against it.

He expected to hear small talk, inane chatter, and instead a guttural growling voice reached his ears.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

Strong hands wrapped around Severus's upper arms and yanked him away from the door.

"You conniving little sneak," Aberforth growled in his ear as he dragged Severus down the stairs. "I knew you had a bad look about you. Get, now." He tossed Severus down the front steps of the Hog's Head and Severus landed in an undignified heap on a patch of grass.

Aberforth slammed the front door. The streets of Hogsmeade were quiet and dimly lit. Severus's breath rasped out of him and his chest heaved with the effort. He tried to collect himself; it was hard to when he envisioned returning to the Dark Lord and informing him that he'd failed the interview so abysmally.

The harsh words he'd heard through the door ran through his mind, perfectly recorded by the adrenaline spike Aberforth caused. The voice sounded inhuman; it spoke of the Dark Lord's

defeat.

Severus didn't know what to make of it. He knew the Dark Lord awaited him at Malfoy Manor, expecting a report. He'd have to share the news of what he'd overheard. It was his only chance, however slim, of staying alive.

April 1980

Severus strode through the streets of Hogsmeade with his face obscured by the overhanging fabric of his drawn hood. Terror like he'd never known raced through him, numbing his extremities as fiercely as any snowstorm. If the wrong person saw him out on the nearly abandoned streets, his life was forfeit and with it any usefulness he could have in protecting the Potters.

Of course, it hadn't been any of their faces in the forefront of his mind when he'd penned the letter to Albus asking to meet. He'd risked an owl and the possibility of it being intercepted because it was the only way to contact the headmaster without exposing Sirius for his association with a Death Eater.

Albus waited for him by the decrepit frame of the Shrieking Shack, looking fiercer than Severus had ever seen as a student. His furrowed thick brows cut harsh lines across his face and he held his wand aloft, poised to attack at any moment.

"Why have you come?" Dumbledore boomed.

"The Prophecy—" he began but was interrupted.

"The one you overheard. I assume you reported it to Voldemort." Severus flinched at the name. He couldn't help it. He'd seen Kamila say it as an edgy attempt at a joke, only to be cut down by Bellatrix with a lazy *Avada Kedavra*.

Severus nodded, too uncertain of what he should say to speak at all. He and Sirius rehearsed this moment but it was different with the formidable wizard before him, projecting so much disapproval.

"He thinks it means the Potters," Severus eventually said and then, guiltily, "I didn't know it was a Prophecy. I only knew he was furious that I was thrown out before the interview. I had to give him something."

"Forgive me for withholding sympathies since you did pledge loyalty to a violent blood purist of your own free will."

"I regret it," Severus said. He hadn't planned to admit that but it was the truth.

Albus studied him for a long while. His features softened fractionally. "I imagine that you do. I confess I'm curious as to why. This is not the first murder Voldemort has committed. Why turn away from him now?"

He'd anticipated this question and rehearsed a line about it all brewing over time, about this being the last degree of heat that bubbled it over, so to speak. But Severus found himself saying, "Lily."

"Lily Potter?" Albus did not bother to hide his surprise.

He'd suddenly wanted to tell the truth but he couldn't reveal Sirius spent time with a Death Eater. So he went for someone else, someone who demonstrably did not spend time with him. It had the

sentimental trappings he suspected Albus would love - a man full of hatred, turned good by the power of love.

If only love had actually played that role in his life.

The entire conversation Albus teased Severus's mind with nonverbal Legilimency and Severus allowed it, gently redirecting his gaze past anything consequential.

Now Albus focused his full power and Severus could not deflect him without showing how powerful he'd become in Occlumency. It wasn't a secret he wanted to share. So instead, Severus quickly pulled real memories to weave a story Albus would believe.

He watched the short dark-haired boy and the bold redhead girl meeting in second year, working in class together, Severus choosing Lily over Marceline in his own subtle way, then the day by the lake. He carefully omitted making up and then fighting all over again as it was all so heavily centered around Sirius.

"Didn't you ask Voldemort to spare her?" Albus asked as he slithered out of Severus's mind.

"Of course not," Severus said shortly. "The Dark Lord would be immediately suspicious if I wanted to show mercy to anyone, let alone a Muggleborn."

"So instead you wish to risk your own life to help a woman who married and is having a child with another man?"

Albus was goading him, Severus realized, trying to provoke him and reveal that he wasn't the reformed man he claimed to be.

"As long as she's alive, it's worth it."

He meant it. He never wanted to see the way Sirius would look if harm came to any of the Potters.

Albus nodded, seeming to accept his story. "Come up to the castle, then. We have much to discuss."

October 1980

"Born with a head full of hair," Sirius said proudly, passing a photo over to Severus. "It's straight for now but I bet it'll curl up like James."

Severus was startled by many things in the photo - how grown up and young Lily looked all at once, how much it hurt to see her when the last thing he'd done was tell her to go to hell, how absolutely tiny her and James's baby looked, and the fact that the photo wasn't moving.

"A Muggle photo?" Severus asked as he handed it back.

"For Lily's parents." Sirius tucked the photo back into his wallet. "They've both got the Muggle flu right now, can't visit and risk passing it to Harry."

"And you're quite sure Harry isn't a prank name Potter told you? That it's not actually Harold? Or Henry, perhaps?"

"Harry James Potter," Sirius said, beaming. "He's got the strongest grip already, about tore my thumb off. I bet he'll make a fantastic Chaser."

"Newborns have a grasping reflex," Severus said and Sirius elbowed him.

"Hush. Coo over my godson with me or be quiet."

Severus smirked into his goblet of wine and then took a long drink, choosing being quiet to Sirius's chagrin.

They sat in the flat Severus moved into shortly before Lucius and Narcissa's son was born. Draco Malfoy was a giant blonde baby, Harry's opposite in nearly every way. Though he had his own home, Sirius pre-paid a year's lease using a small pile of gold from the vaultful his Uncle Alphard recently left him. They'd spent weeks casting protective spells and wards so that no one else could enter.

Sometimes Sirius stayed for days in the flat and they lounged around, pretending to relax. Even then they were always on the edge for the next intrusion of the war - Severus's Mark calling him to the Dark Lord or Sirius receiving a Patronus calling him to the Order.

Most visits were quick, Sirius ducking in to smother Severus with as much touch as he could manage in half an hour before running out again.

"Does You-Know-Who have any idea where they are?" Sirius asked, sounding like he was going for casual but failing.

"Do my ears deceive me? Did Sirius 'Don't tell me any more details now that Dumbledore knows,' Black ask for a detail?"

"It's not funny."

"It's not," Severus agreed. "I report to Albus for a reason. He handles the rest. It's better for everyone this way. Imagine if I told you the Dark Lord was getting close. You'd run straight to James-"

"As I should!"

"-and interfere with a whole host of plans you know nothing about. And risk my life to boot. That was purely hypothetical, by the way. I'm not saying he's getting close."

"So he's not?"

"Sirius."

"Fine," Sirius said grudgingly and thrust his empty glass forward. "Be useful for once and get me more wine."

"As you command," Severus said and took the glass. By the time he returned from the kitchen, Sirius seemed calmer.

"Thanks," he muttered grudgingly as he accepted the drink.

"My pleasure," Severus said and leaned down over Sirius. It was unusual to have the height advantage so he made full use of it, grabbing a hunk of Sirius's hair and forcing his head back to expose his neck.

Sirius groaned, sending vibrations through Severus's lips where they pressed against skin.

"Not fair. I want to do that," Sirius said into Severus's ear. He tossed the wine glass to the side

where it splashed all over the carpet, but that was nothing a cleaning spell couldn't take care of later. He slid his hands around Severus's hips, fitting their bodies closer together.

"You'll have your turn," Severus said and brought their lips together.

Chapter 12

July 1981

There were moments throughout the first half of the year that Severus would pause, look around him, and wonder how the hell he'd ended up where he had. Nearly everything in the entire wizarding world had gone to shit and he was at the epicenter, licking the boots of one side and whispering secrets to the other. Sometimes he genuinely contemplated renouncing magic and going back to Spinner's End. He could untangle the web of legal issues with the Snape home and make a meager wage at Mr. Garrison Grocery & More. Maybe the wizarding world would reach him eventually but he'd have to get at least a couple years of peace first.

But living such a stifled life was what Tobias had done, wasn't it? Becoming his father would bring his childhood fears to fruition.

Also, Sirius would never go. That ended any possibility of Severus going either.

Their time together became more and more sparse. Once a month became an admirable goal. When Sirius tumbled through the flat's front door in July, hair askew and eyes wild, it had been nearly six weeks since they'd spoken.

"They've put the Potters under the Fidelius Charm," Sirius said without preamble. "I'm the Secret Keeper-"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"-so if you report that to You-Know-Who I'll be killed," Sirius finished resolutely.

Severus felt his face grow hot. He put aside the book he'd been reading. "You don't trust me."

"I do but I wanted to let you know it's my life at stake too."

"I can't believe this." Severus turned away. "You should go."

"I do trust you," Sirius insisted. "But there's a spy. I'm trying to save James's life, *Harry's* life. This is bigger than your pride, Severus."

"My pride?" Severus repeated incredulously. It was too much for him, Sirius bursting in spouting ridiculous accusations after so much time apart. "What pride? If I ever had any at all, I cast all of it aside the moment I started seeing the man that tried to kill me."

"Oh, boo fucking hoo," Sirius sneered. "Like you're such a prize, screwing my friend and then joining a supremacy cult because your feelings got hurt."

"Why are you doing this?" Severus asked, swallowing all the vitriol he wanted to spit back at Sirius. "You know any time we see each other could be the last."

"I hope it is," Sirius said coldly. "I really hope I never see your ugly face again."

He slammed the door behind him and moments later the tell-tale cracking of Apparition followed.

Severus sank down onto his sofa, bewildered and furious and hurt. They hadn't fought like that since his twentieth birthday at the pub. He laid there for a while, stewing, and then climbed to his

feet and crossed the room. He pulled a bottle of scotch out of a cupboard but before he could unscrew the top, there was another crack.

Severus turned warily and found Sirius charging back into his room.

"Can we not-"

"I'm shit," Sirius announced, throwing his arms around Severus and squeezing him tightly.

"Sometimes," Severus said quietly, still confused.

"I think James is going to die," Sirius said into Severus's neck. "I'm doing everything I can but I have this feeling...I know you don't like him but he's my best mate...all the things we've been through, now him and Lily and Harry are living on borrowed time..." Sirius trailed off as the sobs took over. Severus returned the embrace and let him cry.

"I love you," Sirius said later as he moved to leave for the second time. "I hope you know that."

"I know," Severus said softly. He felt sore and tender, emotionally bruised, from Sirius's earlier harsh words.

"Be safe, Severus. I couldn't handle it if - well."

They kissed and Sirius, unknowingly, left the flat for the last time.

October 1981

Severus woke up screaming in the very late hours of Halloween.

His arm was on fire. His arm was melting. His arm was the source of all pain and he was going to cut it off.

He scrabbled blindly on his nightstand for his wand, *sectumsempra* on his lips. By the time his fingers closed around the wood, the pain was over but the memory of it kept him tense and wary.

It was his left arm, he realized, and looked down at the Dark Mark. It was suddenly faded, closer to a gray scar than the bold black brand it had been just hours earlier.

Severus's thoughts spun wildly for a moment - Had he been discovered? Was this a curse? Did he need to find Albus? - but a sudden rapping on his bedroom window stilled the mental tailspin.

Severus opened the window and an owl flew in, shook a letter off its leg, and took off again. Severus bent to pick up the parchment and unfolded it, trepidation weighing down each limb.

Severus,

Voldemort is dead. Unfortunately Lily and James are too. Harry survived. Stay where you are until I write you again.

-A. Dumbledore

The tornado in his mind started up again, more furious than before, and after several agonizing minutes he came to the only reasonable conclusion.

The Potters had been under the Fidelius Charm. The charm only broke upon the Secret Keeper's

death. Therefore, Sirius was dead.

His mind calculated it all with surprisingly detached logic. He didn't feel like screaming or throwing things. In fact, the only thing he really felt was exhaustion so profound that he couldn't stay awake another moment.

He crawled back into bed and fell asleep.

The next time Severus woke it was to an owl dropping a copy of the Daily Prophet on his head and swooping out the window he'd never shut. He wasn't a subscriber and the owl hadn't stayed to be paid; it must be a free edition, given the gravity of events.

Severus put the paper aside. He didn't want to see the headlines that didn't include Sirius. He didn't want to search the paper and maybe find his name stuffed down at the bottom, if it was published at all.

That lasted roughly a minute before he couldn't hold out any longer. He unfolded the Prophet and found, as expected, a large splashy headline about the Dark Lord's defeat. He skimmed. No Sirius on the front page. He turned and kept turning. Sirius Black was nowhere to be found.

It didn't matter, really. It was the only possibility. He didn't need a newspaper to confirm it. He went back to sleep.

Severus awoke to an owl for the third time. Yet another Daily Prophet. Two in one day? He opened this one, not expecting much.

The headline at the top of the paper read:

BREAKING: Sirius Black Arrested for Mass Murder!

Severus stared at the nonsensical words, trying to rearrange them into a configuration that he could understand.

Eventually he gave up. He dropped the paper onto the floor, spelled the window shut, and fell into his bed. He fervently hoped he would never wake up again.

September 1982

Sirius stared off to the side of the chessboard, drumming his fingers on his thigh, sighing heavily at random intervals.

"Are you trying to aggravate me into forfeiting?" Severus asked, lifting his eyes from the pieces to smirk at Sirius.

"Would that work?" Sirius sounded hopeful. "Oh, wait, what if I forfeit? Then we're done playing, right?" Sirius slid a hand across the board, shoving all the pieces off. They scattered, yelling protests from where they landed. "I lost. Terribly unfortunate. What should we do now?"

"Your attention span astounds me. Don't you remember the bet we made about, oh, five minutes ago?"

"Oh. Right. Bugger." Sirius sighed even more dramatically than before. "I suppose I lost then, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did," Severus agreed, fully grinning as he leaned back comfortably in his chair. Sirius walked around the table and knelt between Severus's knees, reaching for his robes.

"You know," he said as he paused, smiling up mischievously, "I didn't forget the bet at all."

Severus lifted his head out of the Pensieve.

The memory of his younger self and Sirius faded away and he was left in his quarters at Hogwarts. Alone, he almost thought, until he spotted Albus Dumbledore settled on his sofa, reading a newspaper.

"Headmaster?"

The newspaper lowered. "Ah. Have you finished? I didn't want to interrupt." Albus's tone became more careful as he continued speaking. "This is the third time this week I've found you using the Pensieve. I know you miss her—"

"You don't know anything," Severus spat, a furious and familiar rage roaring to life inside him. "Tell me what you want and get out."

"I expect you to hold your temper better around the students." Albus's disapproval was nearly tangible and Severus couldn't have minded less. He grunted something that could be taken as assent purely to get the headmaster to continue. "I came to check on you. Are you prepared for tomorrow? A professor's first day is always difficult but especially given your age and, hmm, history..."

"I'm fine." Severus indicated a stack of files on his desk, next to the Pensieve. "Lesson plans are ready to go."

"That's not quite what I meant." Albus shifted on the cushion, looking thoughtful. "I have some unsolicited advice to impart. Don't be afraid to relax around the students, Severus. There is no Dark Lord to protect yourself from right now. We all need to heal and continue with our lives."

"If you say so." The two men regarded each other a moment longer and then Albus stood, newspaper tucked under his arm.

"I'll be going now. Good luck, Severus."

As soon as the door shut behind the headmaster, he turned back to the Pensieve. He drew the chess memory out with the tip of his wand and placed it back in its labeled phial. He'd assembled a collection inside a cupboard, rows of little glass jars containing copies of all his happy memories with Sirius. There were dozens but that was nowhere near enough to sustain him for the rest of his life.

Severus selected another memory, the time they'd Apparated to a beach in Germany where they wouldn't be spotted and taken a walk under the stars. He tipped the contents into the Pensieve and bent his head to the silvery liquid.

It was therapy and torture and self-preservation all in one. It didn't matter how many times Albus caught him. Severus wasn't going to stop, not any time soon.

September 1983

Severus ducked into the staff room and made a beeline for the kettle. Minerva sat at a small round

table, dunking a biscuit into her cup, and she looked up at his speedy entrance.

"Hufflepuffs?" she asked sympathetically and he snorted.

"I thought you were above house prejudice," he said.

"With the students, certainly. Among adults, I can admit there are components of truth to the stereotypes."

"If only I could tell my eleven-year-old self you said that. He'd never believe it."

"Then I did my job." She smiled and there was suddenly too much emotion in her smile - sympathy, regret, disappointment. "None of you needed any help from me furthering the house rivalries."

"It seemed so important then," Severus said, sitting down across from her with his own cup. "How I wish I could go back to only caring about house points and detention."

"I do believe, Severus, that you cared about a lot more than that from a younger age than most."

Severus nodded and drank his tea, trying to wash out the unexpected lump in his throat.

September 1984

Had it only been three years since he'd seen Sirius? Often it felt like decades already, like an old shoddily healed wound he only felt when the weather was bad. Infrequently, Sirius's absence would hit him like a bludger, doubling him over in his quarters, screaming into his pillow or crying into his robes.

He didn't know which was worse, feeling it so acutely or feeling it barely at all.

September 1985

Mr. Severus Snape,

Your request to visit an Azkaban prisoner has been denied. We reached this decision because Azkaban prisoners are not allowed visitors.

You may file an appeal with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement within 90 days. If you choose to file, you must retain a solicitor. Self-representation is not allowed in the Court of Appeal.

*Marion Aubert
Secretary to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement*

September 1986

Severus,

Please find attached the denied appeal. As I predicted, there is no precedent for a third party to bring a case for visitation rights.

Out of interest in your case, I've contacted a few possible legitimate claimants but I've received

no responses thus far. It's mostly Death Eaters in Azkaban and no one wants to risk that association with Crouch still in charge.

Regardless, you wouldn't be involved in such a future case and it would take years to work through the courts.

At your convenience, please contact Hannah to arrange either payment in full or a recurring bill for the 1,899 Galleons you owe.

*Yours,
Anu Patel*

Chapter 13

June 1991 - Harry's First Year

It was nine years of Albus telling Severus to relax, to be kinder and more patient, and to let go of the ghosts of the past war. Then came time for Harry Potter to come to Hogwarts.

"Remember," Albus told him near daily that summer, "the Dark Lord may yet live. You might one day need to return to his side. Everything you say and do around Harry Potter must be filtered through that lense." So they protected the Philosopher's Stone and Severus prepared himself to not like Harry Potter.

He thought it wouldn't be too difficult after nearly a decade's experience of being aggravated by children. Then Harry showed up. He stood in the Great Hall and looked around with a Muggle's wonder. His hair had gone curly, like Sirius predicted, and he peered through Lily's green eyes, startlingly light in contrast to his light brown skin.

Harry put on the Sorting Hat and went to Gryffindor. He looked quiet, meek. It was all wrong. Lily's son should be full of the same fiery spirit she'd had. Sirius's godson-

Severus clamped down on that train of thought and turned to Quirinus, starting a conversation about his time in Romania to distract himself.

The year passed that way, Harry grabbing all the attention Severus tried desperately not to give him.

The youngest seeker in a century! Sirius would have lost his mind. He probably would've cried.

The meddling in dangerous affairs, the sneaking around, the maddeningly sly retorts in class - Sirius would have loved it all.

At the end of the year, he went to Albus and tried to resign.

"I can't do it," Severus said, pacing around the headmaster's office. "I can't pretend to hate him."

"Your probation condition was ten years under my supervision. You've completed that so you are free to leave." Albus interlaced his fingers and brought them to his mouth, muffling his next words. "Would she want you to?"

"She? Who - oh." Severus stopped pacing and faced the headmaster. "Why would Lily care about me teaching at Hogwarts?"

"You care about her son," Albus said. "Harry has survived a second encounter with Voldemort-" Severus no longer flinched "-at only eleven years old. He needs to be protected. I'm not confident I can replace you with anyone half as dedicated to keeping him alive."

Lily was dead and she'd hated Severus by the end. She would probably be horrified to know he was allowed to teach anyone, let alone her son.

It was Sirius that actually mattered but after a decade in Azkaban, he had to be deranged. Did he even remember he had a godson? Could he remember anything at all?

“Fine,” Severus said shortly. “But I’m easing up on Harry. If the Dark Lord returns meaningfully, I can say this year showed me he was still alive and I was trying to get you to trust me. I don’t think he’ll be in much condition to be picky, if living on Quirinus’s head is any indication.”

Albus didn’t argue. Severus accepted that as agreement and swept out of the office.

June 1992 - Harry's Second Year

When Ron Weasley burst into Albus’s office, covered in grime and babbling about a bathroom, Severus felt a deep and genuine desire to go into the Chamber of Secrets himself, solely to choke some sense into Harry Potter.

Of course, the boy survived and Ginny Weasley too. The basilisk and Gilderoy’s faculties were not so lucky. Severus was starting to find Albus’s argument that he needed to protect Harry less persuasive. Clearly the boy had a knack for making the stupidest decision at every turn and still emerging unscathed.

Severus attempted to quit for the second time a few hours after the Hogwarts Express pulled away from the school. Albus listened to his irritation-fueled rant with a benign smile.

“Did you want me to repeat that Lily’s son needs protection? I will, happily, as many times as you desire.”

Severus mentally replaced Lily’s son with Sirius’s godson. It did soothe the swells of irritation inside him.

“Not to mention,” Albus continued, “I already have to replace Gilderoy. There’s not an endless pool of professors to choose from.”

So he consented to stay another year.

July 1993

Severus studiously avoided reading the Daily Prophet each day since November 1, 1981. Albus filled him in on anything of import, which in his opinion there wasn’t much of until Harry’s return to the wizarding world.

When a newspaper fell on top of his breakfast plate July 28, Severus restrained the impulse to bat it away onto the floor.

“What is this?” Severus asked with distaste, carefully looking away from it and focusing instead on the carrier, Albus. His stomach dropped when he saw the intense urgency on his face.

“Read it, please, Severus.”

Severus dropped his eyes to the paper and allowed his gaze to focus on the headline.

AZKABAN'S FIRST BREAKOUT: MASS MURDERER SIRIUS BLACK ON THE RUN

Severus slid the paper over, next to his plate. He was relieved to see his hands weren’t shaking.

"There was no need for theatrics, Albus, you could have simply told me."

"I wanted to give you time to react," Albus said, watching him carefully, clearly expecting Severus to be distraught that Lily's betrayer was free. "The Ministry believes Sirius is after Harry and will try to break into Hogwarts. They'll be placing stringent measures on the school this year. I'm going to call an early staff meeting to discuss."

Severus nodded and went back to his toast. Albus watched him a moment longer and then swept out of the Great Hall, presumably to fire off a round of owls to the rest of the staff who didn't live at the school year round.

As soon as the doors shut behind the headmaster, Severus snatched the paper back up and stared at the reproduced photo. It was one he'd never seen of Sirius at what seemed to be the Potters' wedding. They hadn't been in contact then. Looking at the photo, it struck him how little he really remembered Sirius. He'd become a concept more than anything, a memory with a fuzzy face and noiseless voice.

Severus used his wand to cut the photo out from the page and put it away inside his robes. He didn't want to read the bullshit the Prophet would print about Sirius. He didn't know what happened with the Potters' Fidelius Charm. He suspected the Dark Lord invented a way around it but if not, whatever the explanation, he knew it had nothing to do with Sirius.

If it was anyone else, maybe Severus would have had doubts. He knew without question that Sirius would have died before betraying James.

It had been years since Severus used the Pensieve but he felt a sudden need to climb inside a memory, to refresh all the things he'd forgotten and to (temporarily) forget all the troubles he knew this year would bring. He Vanished the scraps of the Prophet and headed down to his quarters.

September 1993 - Harry's Third Year

The door to Remus Lupin's office stood slightly ajar so Severus nudged it open without knocking, carefully balancing the nearly overflowing goblet as he stepped forward.

Remus crouched by an empty glass tank, pouring a green liquid into it with one hand and stirring with the other. He glanced up at Severus and then turned his attention back to the tank without a word.

"Your Wolfsbane," Severus announced unnecessarily.

"Thank you, Severus. Would you mind leaving it on my desk?" His voice was calm and pleasant, the same as it would be if he was speaking to someone he'd just met. "I can pick it up next full moon. That should be easier for you."

"I'd prefer to bring it to you," Severus said. "The sooner you drink it, the better."

"Fine." Remus stood, drying his palms on the front of his robes. "Give it here, then."

Severus passed it over and waited until Remus drank every drop. Non-reactive goblets were expensive; he needed that one back.

"I suppose I should clear the air," Remus said as he passed back the empty cup. "I'm not aiding Sirius."

"I didn't think you were," Severus said icily, trying to dissuade further conversation.

"When we were kids, I would never have believed this is how we would have ended up. All my friends dead, or as good as, and both of us teaching at Hogwarts. I hated you for a long time, you know."

Remus was looking at Severus in a way that suggested he wasn't thinking of hate at all and inwardly he started panicking. The werewolf couldn't be trying to start all that up again! If he got the wrong idea and Sirius ever heard about it -

"Please don't mistake my service to the headmaster as kindness towards you," Severus said stiffly. He bit back the harsher words that threatened to spill forth.

Remus seemed, of all things, amused. "I would never take anything you do as kindness, Severus."

"I'll return next month," Severus said and swept out of the office, empty goblet in hand.

November 1993

"If he got in once, he can do it again."

"I got a letter this morning. Ma wants me to come home."

"Why are the Dementors even here? They couldn't keep him in Azkaban and now they can't keep him out of Hogwarts."

Severus's quill ripped through the essay he was correcting. The noise of parchment tearing was overly loud in the classroom, even with the small talk.

George Weasley paused, on the verge of pouring salamander blood into his cauldron. "I hope that wasn't mine, Professor."

"If it was, it would be vastly improved," Severus drawled and George grinned.

"Then it has to be at least an E now," he said hopefully.

"It wasn't yours, Mr. Weasley, and this may shock you but I am capable of repairing torn parchment." To prove his point, he withdrew his wand and cast Reparo.

"A second year spell, sir, I'm impressed."

"As you should be," Severus said and then gestured at the students, who had paused in their work to watch the exchange with amused smirks. "Here's your reminder that your Strengthening Solutions aren't going to brew themselves and there is a skiving pass up for grabs."

Like always, the possibility that they would be able to skip a later class made them fall silent and focus once more. Albus doubted the wisdom of a skiving pass when Severus first introduced it in his third year of teaching but after a while he came to support the idea. He'd even started offering his own, usable for a staff meeting, to the professor that first submitted marks at the end of each term.

In the newly established silence, broken only by brewing sounds like the scrape of a stirring rod against a cauldron, Severus returned to grading, trying very hard to not give attention to the thoughts that persisted in his mind.

He faithfully believed that Sirius had not betrayed James but he couldn't find a reasonable explanation for why he had tried to get to Harry, armed with a knife, twelve years to the day after the Dark Lord's defeat. Severus was starting to fear that the long imprisonment had driven Sirius mad beyond recovery and that even if Sirius was innocent before, he might not be any longer.

January 1994

The staff room the first week back from holidays was usually a rather miserable place, full of professors facing the realization that the year was only half over. So Severus expected typical gloominess when he approached, looking for Filius to ask him if he wanted to combine their classes to teach the Flight of Fancy charm as it required both their disciplines.

Severus pushed the door open and found instead an array of impressed faces, peering down at a Firebolt as it rested across two small circular tables.

"Is that Harry Potter's Firebolt?" he asked the room at large.

"Technically," Minerva admitted, having the grace to look a little guilty. "I'm returning it this afternoon."

"But look at this handle diameter," Rolanda said fervently, hands hovering but not quite touching.

"The twigs are individually clipped and polished," Filius added knowledgeably.

"No one else thinks this is inappropriate?"

The professors admiring the broom exchanged looks amongst themselves and then turned to Severus as one. "Spoilsport," Pomona sniffed.

"While you're up on your high horse," Minerva said, "can you check if any of the Firebolt twigs fell off?"

"What?"

"Cause you seem to have something stuck up your-"

Severus interrupted her by snatching the Firebolt off the table. "I'm giving this back to Mr. Potter." A chorus of boos arose.

"I didn't even get to try it out," Filius mourned as Severus departed.

February 1994

The first lesson with Gryffindor after Sirius Black broke into their tower was a disaster. Ron Weasley couldn't stop whispering the story to anyone that would listen. Harry Potter sat sullenly in his seat and missed several important steps; he was saved only by Hermione Granger's interference. It was impressive that she managed to brew her own solution to perfection and stop Harry from blowing his up all while sneaking looks at a copy of the Daily Prophet under her desk when she thought she wasn't being watched.

Neville Longbottom wrapped the debacle up by bringing his sample up to be graded only to fumble and drop it onto the edge of Severus's desk where it shattered. He'd already looked quite morose

the entire lesson and as he stared down at the glass shards it seemed he might burst into tears.

Severus remembered dropping many things during his time at Hogwarts. He held back a sympathetic hum.

"Grab a towel from the cupboard under the sink, Mr. Longbottom, and don't wipe too vigorously or it'll likely catch fire...perfect, thank you. Another sample, then."

"Hey, Longbottom," hissed Draco Malfoy as Neville scooped up more potion, "we're taking bets in Slytherin on why you let Black in. Personally I think you're just that stupid but Pansy is convinced it's because you think he's handsome and hoped he'd pay your bed a visit."

Severus held his tongue again, this time to restrain the verbal lashing he wanted to give Draco. He'd always had to be careful around Draco - the last thing he wanted was Lucius swooping down on the castle and he had to be mindful of the Dark Lord's hypothetical impending return.

He and Lucius had corresponded a handful of times over the years, and more often since Draco came to Hogwarts. Sometimes Severus came close to asking Lucius how he'd managed to pass all of his superiority and none of his subtlety to his son.

It was probably Narcissa. She'd always struck him as particularly emotionally fragile. Like the time when-

"Professor Snape?"

Severus started at his name, looking around to find he'd dismissed the class on autopilot and Harry stood before him in an otherwise empty room. Even after nearly three years of having Harry as a student, it was hard to see him without picturing the newborn photo Sirius had shown him, tiny and pink beneath Lily's exhausted grin.

"What is it?" he asked, standing and picking up the sample holder. Harry stood by the desk, only his eyes moving to follow Severus as he carried it over to a cupboard to tuck away til later.

"I had a question about...the Grim." He spoke hesitantly, darting glances back toward the corridor where Ron and Hermione surely waited.

"Last year you asked about the Chamber of Secrets and look how that turned out." Severus sat back down at his desk and looked steadily at Harry. "I'm not convinced I should answer any of your questions."

"It's not like that," Harry said. "I'm not doing anything. The Grim shows up on his own."

"Where have you seen it? Aside from your tea leaves, of course."

"Everywhere. The first time was outside my aunt and uncle's house. Since then it's been at the Quidditch pitch, by the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. I thought I saw one running out of the dorm last night when Ron screamed. It's doing my head in."

"Omens are not an evidence based field," Severus warned. "But let's take the Grim as a factual omen of death. You would see it only once, moments before expiring. That you've seen this more than that proves it's something else." Severus smirked. "Maybe you've gotten a pet."

"Maybe," Harry said, grimacing, not seeming fully convinced. "Thank you, sir."

Harry left; Severus watched him and spotted flashes of bushy brown and red when he opened the

door.

June 1994

Severus scooped the Wolfsbane into its usual goblet and began the considerable trek to Remus's office. He was delayed first by Peeves the Poltergeist swooping about and screaming that Professor Snape was trying to poison someone. The second incident involved a tearful first year with a slash of boils across her face and two shifty third years. Severus released quite a bit of tension with a good lecture before deducting house points and sending the victim to the hospital wing.

He knocked on Remus's office door and stepped inside without waiting for a reply. He expected to see the other wizard at his desk, scratching away with a quill or reading from a book propped open on his desk, but the office was empty.

"Lupin?" he tested, feeling stupid, and then moved to look for a note on the desk.

His breath caught as he found, instead, the map Sirius had shown him so many years ago. He'd forgotten it entirely and seeing it again brought back a rush of memories, ones he'd mostly elected not to put into the Pensieve.

Severus peered down at the map, thinking to find Remus, and then he stopped breathing altogether when he saw a cluster of three dots, moving towards the edge of the map at a very rapid pace: R. Weasley, S. Black, and P. Pettigrew. They passed the Whomping Willow's marker and then disappeared.

Harry and Hermione were there too, he saw. At least they seemed to be staying a good distance from the Willow.

Severus spotted another person heading quickly towards them and if Remus was within reach he would have slapped him for his idiocy. Running around on a full moon with no Wolfsbane!

Severus focused on Remus and his need for the potion as he stuffed the map into his pocket and hurried to the grounds. He simply couldn't think about what else he'd seen, those two names together that might explain everything.

There was no sight of Remus or any of the students outside the Willow. He tried not to panic at the possibility of all of them trapped in the Shrieking Shack with the slobbering beast that once threatened his own life. As he traveled down the passage, one hand holding the goblet and the other his wand, he ran through the list of curses that worked against werewolves and wondered if Sirius would forgive him if he had to kill Remus. He hoped it wouldn't come to that.

He burst into the Shack, drawing five sets of eyes. Peter Pettigrew was nowhere to be seen. He turned to Remus and held out the goblet.

"You utter fool," he hissed because it gave him something to say, somewhere to look. Remus looked horrified as he took the potion and gulped it down.

"I didn't..."

"I shouldn't be surprised you'd be here, Snape. Always sticking your big nose where it didn't belong," Sirius spat from where he stood and Severus finally swung his eyes to him.

Whatever he'd imagined, it was worse. Sirius cut a skeletal figure and his hair fell long and matted across his back. An untamed beard hid the bottom half of his face. None of that bothered Severus;

it was the deranged look of hatred in Sirius's eyes that concerned him.

Severus looked at the children next. Ron leaned against a yellowed, stained mattress wrestling something in his pocket. One leg was awkwardly straightened before him, blood smeared across his calf. Hermione and Harry hovered near their friend, wands out, looking both furious and fearful.

"We need to get out of here before Remus transforms," Severus said curtly.

"Transforms?" Hermione echoed. "So, Professor Lupin really is a werewolf?"

"You knew?" Remus asked.

"I suspected," she said quietly. Harry and Ron must not have known of her suspicion; they looked baffled.

"The Wolfsbane Professor Lupin just took should make him docile. However, there are many of us and he's under a great deal of stress. We're better not to take any chances." He looked at Sirius again, briefly, and received a glare for his efforts. He strode to the trapdoor and pulled it open.

"Harry, Hermione, can you help Ron out?"

Once they were in the tunnel, the trapdoor locked behind them, Sirius gestured at Ron. "Let's see Peter now."

"Peter?" Severus looked between Ron and Sirius. "That's Ron Weasley."

"Not this again," Sirius growled.

Hermione answered quickly. "Sirius says Ron's rat is Peter Pettigrew. That he and Peter Pettigrew and Harry's dad became Animagi."

Severus turned to Sirius. "Is that so?" He thought of Sirius working on the map, saying it would serve an important secret. So he'd been an Animagus and never told Severus. It wasn't the best time but he didn't stop himself from asking, "What's your animal form?"

"A black dog," Harry offered when Sirius said nothing, only glowered at the rat still scrambling to get away from Ron.

"The Grim," Severus said and Harry nodded.

"Great, Snape's caught up. Can we get on with this? Ron?" Sirius pointed at the boy.

Ron reluctantly dragged his rat out of his pocket. The little gray creature squeaked furiously within Ron's grip.

Peter went as a rat, Sirius had said about their Halloween party, but that was second year. There was no way they mastered the Transfiguration that young; it had to have been a coincidence.

"Snape, let me use your wand," Sirius said, a demanding hand outstretched.

Severus ignored him and pointed his wand at the rat. With a jet of blue light and a bang, it morphed into a man, balding and red-faced with watery eyes.

"Finally!" Sirius crowed.

"Don't let him do it," Peter cried from where he cowered on the floor. "He'll kill me, like he tried

to do all those years ago. I didn't do it, I swear. I'm not a Death Eater. It's him!"

"I don't believe it," Hermione murmured, a hand pressed to her mouth. Harry seemed to be struggling with a torrid of complicated emotion. Ron, wedged between them, looked like he might be sick at any moment.

"We need to get to the castle," Severus said briskly. He stunned Peter mid-protest and then cast several Episkeys on Ron's ankle. It needed more healing but it was enough that he could carefully limp along unsupported. Then they set off, Peter's limp form hovering next to them.

Once they emerged onto the grounds, Severus folded his arms against the night's chill, wand dangling from one hand to stay trained on Peter.

Sirius fell back and began to speak with Harry. Hermione and Ron were drawn into the conversation as well and soon they were chattering about seeing each other over the summer. Severus couldn't believe how normal Sirius sounded after so long in Azkaban.

"Why's it so bloody cold in June?" he heard Sirius grumble and all at once a pit of ice formed in his stomach that had nothing to do with the temperature.

"Dementors," he hissed. He turned to look behind them and found what could have easily been an endless sea of them, rows and rows of hooded figures drifting closer by the second.

He flicked his wand and Peter's body tumbled onto the grass. "Harry, Lupin's told me you can cast a corporeal Patronus. Is that true?" Harry nodded. "Be prepared then."

"I can too," Sirius said, looking at Ron and Hermione expectantly. After a moment, Ron passed his wand over. Sirius took it slowly and then stood frozen, staring down at his hands holding a wand for the first time in almost thirteen years.

Voces exploded in Severus's head. Tobias screaming, Eileen sobbing, Sirius spitting hate-

Severus forced the memories away and lifted his wand. "Expecto Patronum!" he cried and heard Harry and Sirius cast their spells at the same time.

Three silvery animals took off towards the approaching sea of Dementors, knocked several to the ground, and misted away.

Severus and Harry cast again. Sirius shook his head. "There's too many. We need to run for the castle. We should make it." He looked down at Peter. "We have to leave him. Levitation won't work at that speed."

Severus shook his head as he took a step closer to Peter. "He's the proof of your innocence. I can carry him, I'll."

"There's no time to argue. We already have to help Ron."

Severus looked at him and Sirius looked back, meeting Severus's gaze for the first time that evening. There was a storm in his brown eyes and a stubborn resolve that Severus couldn't fight. "Fine."

They hoisted Ron between them so that his feet dangled uselessly above the ground. Then the five of them sprinted away, leaving Peter to slowly wake as Severus's stunning spell lost effect. He was screaming when the doors of Hogwarts shut behind them.

Hermione cried as they walked through the castle, tears streaming down her cheeks, silent except for the occasional shuddering gasp. Ron was back on his feet, limping, freckles dark against the pale white of his face. Harry's jaw was set and his gaze locked forward.

Severus dropped the students off at the hospital wing, carefully shielding Sirius from Poppy's view, telling her to keep them under her care and away from other students until the headmaster came to get them. She agreed though she seemed bewildered by his instructions and the state of the students.

Then they were alone in the corridor. They stared at each other longer than was wise, considering everything else going on.

"We need to speak with the headmaster," Severus said when it became obvious Sirius wasn't going to speak.

"After you, Professor."

In his office, Albus listened to their story impassively, betraying emotion only when Severus reached the point of leaving Peter Pettigrew to the Dementors. He leapt from his seat and hurried to the large office window, peering out into the blackness as if he could possibly see something.

"Why did you leave that until the end? We need to go look for him."

"It's too late," Severus said. "He was being Kissed as we stepped inside."

Albus turned from the window, an unexpectedly sorrowful look on his face. "And no one - you saw no one else?"

"No," Severus answered, confused by the question.

Albus closed his eyes. "I see." He opened them, still looking overly upset. "I have to go. If you two will wait here, I'll summon the Minister when I return."

He swept out of the office.

"That was bizarre," Sirius said as the door clicked close. "What could be more pressing than me?"

"Humble as ever," Severus said automatically, although he agreed.

Sirius shot him a venomous glare. "Why did you have to be the one to find us?"

"I was bringing Remus his Wolfsbane, as I said."

"I bet you've been fucking him the whole year."

"Is that really the first thing you want to talk about?"

"Why not? We have time." Sirius leaned back in his chair and smiled nastily. "But I have other topics for you to choose from if you'd like. How about you failing to protect James and Lily? Or never writing me in twelve years? Oh, no, I have a fantastic idea. Let's talk about you, the Death Eater, sitting pretty in Hogwarts while I'm in Azkaban."

It was like the year they'd been together during the war hadn't happened. Sirius emanated hate and anger, looking at Severus as if he rather wished he'd been the one under the Dementor's mouth.

"No," Sirius said when Severus stayed silent. "I didn't think any of that would catch your fancy."

Severus was tired, from their conversation, from the night's events, and from the past thirteen years. So he sat still, said nothing, and waited for Albus to return.

Chapter 14

July 1994

SIRIUS BLACK ACQUITTED

Minister Fudge promised a, “speedy and just,” trial for Sirius Black after one of his supposed victims, Peter Pettigrew, was discovered alive on Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizards grounds in early June. He made good on his word as less than two months later, the formerly convicted man walked out of the Wizengamot acquitted of all charges.

“We will next arrange a hearing on Mr. Black’s miscarriage of justice claim to determine appropriate compensation, if any,” the Wizengamot said in a published statement. “We continue to investigate the circumstances of Peter Pettigrew’s reappearance and subsequent unauthorized Kiss by the Dementors of Azkaban.”

We were unable to reach Sirius Black for comment.

August 1994

The Black house looked much the same as it had in Severus’s childhood even after it stood empty nearly ten years, since the day Walburga drank six doses of Dreamless Sleep in Regulus’s bedroom, several years after her son and husband died. Her suicide was one of the bits of news Albus had passed on from the papers. Severus had felt entirely unemotional about the event; he hadn’t been upset or pleased, only wondered if Sirius would be told.

He wished for the same numbness as he walked up the drive to the front door of 12 Grimmauld Place. He felt everything from the two beings stuffed into his one inferior body. There was the child he had been, sneaking through this same door convinced a wonderful life awaited him at Hogwarts, and the adult he was, mourning how completely it had all gone to shit.

Severus paused at the front door, wallowing in his own melancholy, and the door swung open before he could knock. He looked down at where Kreacher stood, squinting up at him.

“Master Sirius is this way,” he grunted and shuffled back into the house. Severus followed, through rooms that were as familiar as the school corridors, and Kreacher led him to the formal sitting room.

The furniture had all been pushed against the walls, leaving a misshapen clearing in the middle of the room. It was there that Sirius stood, or bent rather. He wore only thin cotton trousers and pressed both hands to the floor, his long hair gathered in a ponytail that draped down toward his feet.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked.

Sirius rolled up slowly, head hanging down until his shoulders straightened, and then his hands lifted above his head as it came into view. "Yoga," Sirius answered, raising his gaze upward.

"And that is?"

Sirius dropped his hands and turned to look at Severus. "Kind of like Occlumency but using your body instead of magic." He grabbed a towel off a nearby settee and used it to dry the sweat from his forehead and neck.

"I - ah. Alright." Severus stepped closer, his eyes bouncing down to take in the scar that still slashed across Sirius's arm. "I got your letter."

"I didn't think you'd taken to showing up at my house of your own accord," Sirius said with a small, crooked smile. "You never were much for spontaneity."

"You had enough for both of us, and then some." It was hard to try and speak naturally when he felt so much and had so many things to say but Sirius's letter was short and casual. He seemed to be in a much better mood than he had that night in June. Severus didn't want to ruin it.

"Tea?" Sirius asked, dropping the towel back down. "Coffee, wine, vodka?" He'd kept the beard but cleaned it up. That with the very long hair created an entirely different look than any he'd had before. Maybe that was the point.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Right to business, then." Sirius came to stand before him. "Here fine or do you prefer the bedroom?"

Severus shifted backward. "I didn't come for that."

"No? Then what? Surely not for scintillating conversation. Not much to say about my time in solitary confinement. I could tell you the food was shit and sometimes they didn't feed me for days at a time. I heard my cousin Bellatrix screaming and laughing all day and night, that was a hoot."

"There was a cell next to me. I couldn't see the person, of course, but one day I heard them smacking something and screaming for hours until it suddenly stopped. Turns out they, whoever it was, bashed their head on the bars until their skull cracked. Luckily, the guards "saved" them and they went right back to their cozy cell."

"Shall I tell you more? Or would you like to regale me with tales of working at Hogwarts? I'm sure you have some real tearjerkers. There were probably times you, I dunno, stubbed your toe on a table leg or something."

"I did write to you," Severus said quietly. "You said I didn't that night, but I did. I tried to see you, too, I asked the Ministry-"

"I don't care, Severus," Sirius interrupted. "I truly, sincerely don't care. I was in Azkaban and you were free. I didn't have a trial and you did. I'll always hate you for that. But I'll still fuck you. Let's stop talking and do that."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm not doing that again. You hating me while I'm - I don't hate you."

"You won't do this?" Sirius touched him then, pressed lips to his neck and slid hands inside his robe.

"Sirius—"

Sirius shushed him and kissed him, licked his lower lip and slipped a searching tongue inside his mouth. Sirius's chest felt bony against his, arms still too thin when he gripped them.

Severus felt his resolve crumbling away under Sirius's touch, already greatly weakened by so long without it.

Hadn't he known this would happen as soon as he'd gotten Sirius's letter?

After, Sirius offered tea again, with the air of someone hosting a guest that had overstayed their welcome. Severus declined and left, feeling like a rejected teenager all over again.

December 1994 - Harry's Fourth Year

"I can't believe he gave detention at the Yule Ball! Snape has been exceptionally foul this year, don't you think?"

"I bet he's mad Slytherin doesn't have a champion."

"I heard he likes Madam Maxime and he's furious Hagrid got her first."

"Ugh, stop! I'll be sick."

"No way he could even do her. It'd be like throwing a quill down a corridor."

Severus pointed his wand at the rosebush concealing the gossiping students and blasted it apart. He felt a mean satisfaction when one of the girls screamed.

"Professor Snape!" Francine Green, a seventh year Hufflepuff, fidgeted with her robes, her cheeks a furious scarlet. "We were just, er—"

"Get back inside," he growled and they scampered away.

He usually tried not to let the words of adolescents get to him, especially when they said so many stupid things so often, but after the stress of the year, he couldn't help but simmer over what he'd heard.

He prowled through the gardens, disturbing chatting and snogging students alike, shooing and deducting points until he was certain he was alone in the cold winter night.

He found a stone bench and sat on it, drawing in measured breaths. With Harry being an unqualified Triwizard champion, Igor lurking about, Sirius sending sporadic owls, and Alastor barking at him for being a Death Eater, he'd increased both his time spent refining his Occlumency skills and his supply of Calming Draughts.

"Professor Snape?" Severus looked up, preparing to bark something, and spotted Harry approaching him. "Are you alright?"

"Is your date alright?" Severus asked back pointedly and Harry grinned, rubbing the back of his

head and flattening his carefully styled curls in the process.

"Ginny's fine. She's dancing with some sixth year. I think I was a horrible enough date that she might finally stop fancying me." Harry suddenly started, as though realizing who he was talking to.
"Er, sorry, you didn't need to know all that..."

"Quite." Severus nodded at the castle. "You should head back inside. It's almost time for the champion talent show."

"Talent show?" Harry looked comically fearful. "Professor McGonagall didn't say anything about a talent show!"

"She didn't? Unfortunate. Perhaps you could juggle. Have you ever juggled, Mr. Potter?" Severus smirked at Harry's clear terror. "I'm making this up."

"You're evil," Harry said, shaken.

"I try," Severus said. "Now, in you get."

Harry headed towards the building's warmth and his schoolmates' company. Severus stayed outside, stationary on the cold stone.

February 1995

Severus protested strongly but futilely when he saw his name assigned to chaperone the Hogsmeade trip on Valentine's weekend right before the second Triwizard Task. Albus only smiled and requested Severus bring back a bouquet of chocolate flowers.

The streets of Hogsmeade were full of canoodling students. It didn't take long for Severus to decide he needed a break. He ducked into The Three Broomsticks for a Butterbeer, preferably to-go if he could convince Rosmerta.

"Professor Snape!" a very familiar voice called and Severus headed toward Harry automatically.

He expected to see Hermione and Ron but stopped short when he spotted the other two in the booth. Remus and Sirius exchanged a look that nearly made Severus hex them both.

"Did you need something, Mr. Potter?" he asked unpleasantly.

Harry looked taken aback as he said, "Er, just wanted to say hi."

"You've said it."

"Don't be rude," Remus admonished.

Severus's lip curled into an impolite sneer at the werewolf's nerve but before he found a retort, Sirius spoke. "You should join us, Severus."

Every head in the booth turned and stared at Sirius with varying degrees of surprise. Severus managed to keep his expression unaffected, if only just.

"As thrilling as I'm sure your company would be, I'm working."

"It's Valentine's Day," Sirius said. "Surely you"

“I can’t.” Severus took a step back. “Mr. Weasley, don’t forget you have detention tonight for intentionally exploding your cauldron on Mr. Malfoy.” Secretly, Severus rather enjoyed seeing Draco dripping in fluorescent orange sludge, since the explosion followed him calling Hermione a Mudblood.

He’d wanted to grab Draco by the shoulders and shake him until some sense rattled into his brain. How could the same prejudices be swirling around so many years later? How could Severus stand by and watch another generation make the exact same mistakes he had?

It was terrifying to think of how many families would return to the Dark Lord, and how quickly.

Back on the street, Severus made it a few steps before he felt a hand on his elbow.

“I really am working,” Severus snapped when he turned and found Sirius hovering behind him.

“I’ll walk with you,” Sirius said and gestured forward. Severus couldn’t decide if he hated or loved walking in front of other wizards with Sirius. It was the first time they’d done so in all their time knowing each other.

“Were you and Lupin enjoying your date?” Severus sniped as they rounded the corner by the post office.

“Yes, thank you. I thought since you fucked him, I should have a go too.” Sirius smiled over at him pleasantly.

Severus struggled to keep his voice even as he asked, “Did you really?”

They stopped by the Shrieking Shack; it was deserted as usual. Aside from the first visit of the year when the third years checked it out, an empty silent building held little appeal for the students.

“What if I did?”

“I might kill you.” The words were out before he’d considered them and he immediately regretted it. He didn’t want to be that person anymore; he *wasn’t* that person anymore.

“Then we’ll both be relieved that I didn’t.” Sirius looked over Severus’s shoulder, off into the forest, as he added, “I don’t hate you, you know. Like I said before. I hate what happened.”

“Mm. I don’t blame you. I hate it too.”

“But you love me.” Sirius met his gaze now. “You always have.”

“Pathetically, as you’ve said.”

“That was a long time ago. When I really did despise you.”

“And now?” Severus asked, dreading the answer.

“I’m obsessed with you.”

It wasn’t a compliment. Sirius said it fiercely, not fondly; his gaze flickered with equal amounts of pain and desire.

When Sirius stepped closer, Severus had years of Albus’s warnings blaring in his head. The Dark Lord would return. Anyone who saw Severus now could report to him later. They stood on a public street, the not-too-distant laughter and shouts of schoolchildren reaching their ears. It was

incredibly foolish, potentially deadly even, to consider not pulling away.

But that was how it always was with them - the wrong choice, stupid and risky beyond all reason.

Severus slipped his hands to the back of Sirius's head and tugged him closer. Sirius smiled into the kiss, his own hands drifting low to curve around Severus's waist.

If there was another war coming, more death and inevitable tragedy, he didn't intend to go into it with regrets.

June 1995

Lucius Malfoy squatted over Severus's prone form and shook him by the shoulder. "Do you need revival?" he asked quietly, checking for consciousness.

"No." Severus forced himself into a seated position and spit a mouthful of blood onto the dirt beside him. "I'm fine. Our Lord was merciful."

"I can tell, seeing as you're not dead." Lucius stood and offered a hand to Severus. Severus grabbed it and heaved himself to his feet, fighting a wave of pain and dizziness that threatened to knock him back down. "Come to the Manor. I'll patch you up so Dumbledore doesn't worry you've lost any trust."

Severus agreed, partially because he was too out of sorts to argue. He allowed Lucius to Side-Apparate him as he didn't trust his own abilities in his current state. Lucius helped him to the kitchen - "Tile floors, easiest to clean blood off." - and summoned one of his many house elves.

The elf went to work healing and bandaging Severus, who sagged with relief against the wooden chair as the pain began to lift. She was next sent to fetch goblin mead from the cellar.

"I'm glad you've returned," Lucius said, watching him intently. "I wasn't convinced you would. Especially as Draco says you're very chummy with Harry Potter."

"I had reason to suspect the Dark Lord would be returning. I believe having Potter's trust can only further my ability to help. It also endears me to Albus as he has quite a weakness for the boy."

"There's logic in that." Lucius took the bottle and glasses from his house elf and poured generously. He passed one over to Severus. "To our Lord's return," he toasted.

Severus lifted his glass, inclined his head, and took a drink. "I regret missing it. I'm sure it was a powerful display."

"It was," Lucius said. "To think we have Crouch to thank for all this - escaping his father, finding our Lord in an Albanian forest, protecting him, going undercover as a professor - it's all quite remarkable." He refilled his empty glass. "The Mudbloods and blood traitors have gained far too much strength these thirteen years."

"The Dark Lord will make quick work of them all," Severus said dismissively.

As he did one fourteen-year-old boy? Severus argued against his own statement mockingly. Not that Harry was typical for a boy his age. He'd not only rescued himself but an injured Cedric Diggory as well. It was remarkable, though Severus, of course, would never come anywhere close to admitting that to Lucius.

Suddenly Severus couldn't stand being there one moment longer, having such a normal conversation with a man that had killed Muggles and was about to happily do so again, the man that had taken Severus under his wing only to trap him in the nest.

Severus set down his half-empty glass. "I need to get going. The headmaster is expecting me."

Lucius had gotten himself so drunk that he only waved Severus away. Severus walked out of the Manor, past the wards, and poised to Apparate to the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

Voldemort's back, he remembered Harry screaming as he sprawled on the Quidditch pitch, clutching the Triwizard trophy and Cedric's limp body. A shiver of dread went through him.

July 1995

"Can I suck your toes?" Sirius asked absent-mindedly, twirling his fingers through Severus's sparse chest hair.

"Absolutely not."

"What about your ears?"

"Eurgh, no."

"Your...knee caps?"

"Sirius."

"What? I'm just wondering why the only body part allowed in my mouth is your—"

Somewhere, a door slammed, and they both jumped. Sirius startled so badly he fell out of the bed, causing his own thump.

"Who else is here?" Severus hissed as they both rushed to pull their robes back on.

"I don't know." Sirius yanked his braid out from where it had gotten stuck beneath the robe's collar. "This is headquarters now, people will come and go as they please."

"What if it's Albus? What's my excuse for being here?"

"Well, not toe jobs, clearly."

Severus continued grumbling as he snuck out into the hallway and down the grand staircase. He made it to the foyer before someone spoke.

"Severus?" Arthur Weasley asked as he came out of the sitting room, looking surprised. Severus swore internally and mentally crossed his fingers that Arthur wouldn't mention the run-in to Albus. "I wasn't expecting you here."

"Checking things out," Severus said brusquely. "All looks, er, great."

"That's good," Arthur said. "I'm getting things ready for the children. Harry's coming to stay here for the rest of the summer so of course Ron and Hermione want to come."

"Mm." Severus edged toward the door. "Well, I'll be off, then."

He held his breath until he made it safely out of the house and then exhaled heavily in relief.

He and Sirius were being incredibly childish. It was clear that only bad things could come of their behavior. Yet it was the most alive Severus felt since Sirius went to Azkaban. He had no intention of stopping.

August 1995

“...and that’s all the goblins will commit to for now,” Bill Weasley finished.

“Excellent, thank you,” Alastor said gruffly as he stood. “That concludes our last meeting before the school year. With so many members being Hogwarts staff, we’ll have to work out an alternative method of communication. Albus will be in touch via owl.” He paused and turned to Molly Weasley. “What’s to eat tonight?

Conversation burst to life in the small room. Bill and Arthur began to collect the scattered parchment while Nymphadora Tonks kicked her booted feet up on the table, idly changing her hair from green to blue and back again.

“Won’t you stay for supper?” Molly called after Severus as he moved to exit into the hall. “It’s the last night before term; the children and I spent all day cooking.”

Severus turned to look back into the room and found every eye on him.

“Yes, stay,” Arthur said encouragingly. “You haven’t this whole summer.”

“If you don’t, I’m going to assume those rumors at school were true and you are a vampire,” Tonks put in.

“Way too fat to be a vampire,” Sirius called out and the good nature in the room evaporated.

“*Sirius*,” Molly hissed, scandalized.

“We can’t all pull off cocaine waif like you,” Severus said. Molly covered her face with her hands.

“You could at least try.”

“I could try to stick my wand up your-”

“Professor Snape?” Severus turned and found the trio of Gryffindors, forever having the most inconvenient timing. He was caught off guard by the warm grin Harry aimed at him. “You’re still here? Does that mean you’ll stay for dinner?”

Well, if Harry was asking...

They ate outside, at a large Conjured table placed on the driveway. Severus boldly sat next to Sirius.

“Cocaine waif, that was a good one.” Sirius tipped his beer bottle. “Cheers.”

“I stayed so I can stick around after and rip your clothes off,” Severus murmured.

“Hope you two are getting along over there,” Tonks yelled at them from several seats down.
“Sirius is my cousin, you know.”

"So you've said all summer," Severus said.

"I've been wanting to ask you, Snape." Alastor craned his neck to better see Severus in his seat. "Was that imposter bastard as good a professor as they say?" He jerked a thumb towards the corner where Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the twins sat.

"He was unorthodox," Severus answered, "but his lessons made an impact."

"It's a shame he got away," Alastor grumbled and then returned to his soup.

Friendly conversation flowed throughout the meal, between all sorts of configurations of people. By the time pudding was cleared away, Sirius chatted to the twins, Remus and Tonks were engaged in an earnest conversation with Hermione, and Mundungus Fletcher thumb-wrestled Ginny.

"I win!" Ginny cried, drawing her hand back. "For the third time. Pay up!"

"No betting at the dinner table," Molly said reprovingly.

Eventually the students were sent to bed, most of the members left, and it was only Remus, Tonks, Sirius, and Severus left, a bottle of Firewhiskey open on the table between them.

"You know," Sirius said to Tonks, speech slightly slurred, "these two dated for a while."

Tonks looked highly interested in this bit of information. Remus and Severus sent equally rankled glares Sirius's way.

"We didn't date," Severus snapped.

"Shagged like bunnies, then." Sirius burped loudly.

"You like men?" Tonks asked Remus.

"Er, not only men, but why - ?" Remus shook his head. "Wait, ignore I said that."

"Remus has a crush," Sirius cooed. "Tonks, quick, kiss his cute little wolfy face!"

Tonks rolled her eyes. "I'll kiss him the day you kiss Snape, how about that?"

"Done," Sirius said and leaned over so quickly that Severus didn't have the time or the reflex to pull away. It was a quick kiss, over before it fully began, but it was enough. Severus remembered being a boy and wanting so badly for Sirius to acknowledge him in front of his friends. Now he (kind of) was. It healed fissures in Severus's heart that he hadn't known were still there.

Under the table, Sirius gave his knee a quick squeeze. "Your turn," he said smugly to Tonks.

Remus and Tonks stared at them with wide eyes. "I didn't think you'd do it," she squeaked.

"Stop stalling!"

Tonks gave Remus an equally speedy peck and her hair turned a violent shade of pink.

"On that note," Tonks said quickly, climbing to her feet, "I'm out. Owl me, Remus, alright?"

When it was just the three of them, Remus's flush lessened and he turned thoughtful eyes on the two of them. "That wasn't your first time kissing each other."

Severus expected denial and felt a twisting panic when Sirius answered with, “Nah. Not by a long shot.”

“Since last summer?” Remus guessed.

“Since we were fifteen.”

“Sirius,” Severus hissed.

“Remus won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“No.” Remus grimaced. “That means before me. So I was caught in the middle of you two.”

“I’m sorry,” Severus said, and meant it. It was easier to be gracious when he had everything he wanted. “For that, for all of it.”

“I don’t forgive you, exactly, but I’ve moved on. And I appreciate knowing the truth.” Remus drained the last swallows from his cup. “How did you two even start up?”

“Well,” Sirius began, his hand back on Severus’s knee, “one day, Regulus and I went to the park...”

Chapter 15

October 1995 - Harry's Fifth Year

While the castle maintained its elegant appearance for the holidays, the staff room looked like a year one's craft had exploded all over it. Streamers, handmade paper garlands, and glitter were key features.

Severus sat at a table late in the afternoon, dousing himself in tea to prepare for the students' impending hyperactivity at the Halloween feast, when Minerva walked in. She looked around the room sourly and in one swift movement reached up and plucked several garlands off the wall

"Not to your taste?" Severus asked, smirking.

"Anything that woman touches is not to my taste." She sat down heavily across from Severus. "Do you believe she—"

"Do I hear Umbridge slander?" Pomona popped her head in and then called down the corridor, "Filius, Rubeus, get in here!"

Five minutes later, the rest of the staff had followed the commotion and were all talking over each other in their haste to complain about the Ministry's pink toad.

"She could be a drinking game," Rolanda said. "Take a shot every time she mentions Fudge."

"Or every time she clears her throat," Filius said.

"We'd be dead within an hour," Minerva protested.

"Rubeus could probably last two," Severus said.

"Wouldn't want to," Rubeus said gravely. "Not if it meant being around her longer."

Their conversation carried on to such a level that eventually Cho Chang poked her head into the room, looking concerned as she asked, "Is everything alright, professors?" They hurried to pull themselves together.

Later, sitting next to Dolores at the feast and suffering through her frequent *hem hems*, Severus made eye contact with Filius. They quickly looked away from each other to avoid bursting into laughter.

January 1996

It was a cosmically just punishment for Severus to have to teach Occlumency to Lily's son at the exact age she was when they worked on it together.

There were far more pressing issues but it was still all Severus could think about. When Harry grabbed his head to massage the beginnings of a headache, he saw himself doing the same thing all those years ago. Most of the time his school years felt fuzzy and faraway, an entirely different life he wasn't sure he'd really lived. But during Occlumency lessons, it could have all happened the week before. He felt that heavy guilt he always did when he thought about Lily, how horribly he'd

treated her and how unfair it was that he lived when she didn't.

"Drinking Pepper-up helps," Severus offered. Harry tried to force a smile that ended up looking more like a grimace.

"I'm used to headaches," Harry said and pointed at his lightning bolt scar.

"Does it hurt?" Severus asked, surprised.

"If Voldemort's around, or if I dream about him. It's hurt loads more since he came back."

"I wonder if Occlumency will lessen the pain," Severus mused. "It sounds more mental or magical than actual pain from the scar itself."

"You know what's funny? It hurt the first time I saw you. I thought it meant you were evil. I think you were just sitting next to Quirrell."

"I am also evil, haven't we established that?"

Harry grinned and then straightened up. "I think I can do another round of practice."

Severus lifted his wand. "Let's get to it then, Mr. Potter."

June 1996

Severus paced the halls of Sirius's house, cursing everyone he could possibly blame for the situation.

"Fuck the Dark Lord. Fuck Lucius. Fuck Bellatrix. Fuck the Dementors. Fuck Fudge."

And so on.

Four hours had passed since Harry practically tackled him at Hogwarts, claiming to have had a vision of Sirius being tortured in the Department of Mysteries. Sirius had answered Severus's Patronus nearly instantly so Severus had contacted Albus, hidden away somewhere even he didn't know, and Albus summoned all the Order members to headquarters right away.

They'd planned quickly, left quickly, and Severus the double agent was left sitting around and waiting for everyone else to spring the trap they'd laid.

Nearly everyone had protested using Harry as bait, although of course Harry was strongly supportive of the idea. Eventually he and Albus convinced the lot of them, save Sirius who looked frustrated near to tears.

Severus couldn't take the pacing anymore. He felt he might scratch his own skin off if he didn't find something to keep him busy.

Without much of a conscious decision, he climbed the staircase that had seemed so monstrous when he was nine. He walked to Sirius's bedroom and slipped inside.

Sirius had chosen to move back into his childhood bedroom upon his release from Azkaban. He hadn't changed the room much. There was the same mahogany furniture, nearly twenty years older. They bore remarkably few signs of age; when he began sliding open drawers they moved smoothly and soundlessly.

He wasn't snooping. He didn't plan on finding anything. He simply needed a distraction. He pawed through drawers of clothes, stacks of magazines, and opened the wardrobe.

That was where he found the box.

It was shoved in the back, hidden behind a thick wall of robes. Severus couldn't say what possessed him to push them aside and peer at the exposed space but when he did, there the box sat. It was plain cardboard, lacking any brand or distinguishing mark.

Idly curious, Severus carried it to Sirius's bed. He lifted the lid and found a stack of letters.

At that, he felt twinges of guilt and doubt. He had no good reasons to be going through Sirius's things and many to stop, Sirius's potential fury being a powerful one. This was the longest stretch they'd gotten along in their entire lives and he would hate to ruin it with something so senseless.

Still his fingers dipped in and closed over the topmost letter.

It was from James, inane chatter penned while the Potters were under the Fidelius charm. Severus pulled out more letters from James, a couple each from Lily and Remus and Peter, and a few trinkets. There was a stolen snitch with the charms long since worn off. It sat heavy in Severus's palms, wings unfurled limply. There was also a broken ornamental quill and a snowglobe of Hogsmeade.

Underneath it all laid a final letter. As Severus unfolded the parchment, he noticed how mussed it was, with what seemed to be water damage across the lettering.

Dear cousin,

I could fill scrolls of parchment insulting you. I don't have the time or inclination but you should know that. How weak you are to have chosen a side only to betray it.

The Dark Lord agrees to your bargain. Your precious Potter will be spared. He only wants the boy.

Meet me at the family villa in Jaipur on the 28th.

Bellatrix

Severus read the words again and again. He touched the spots on the paper that he recognized then as dried tears. He traced Bellatrix's name with his finger.

He couldn't breathe. He could, but only shallowly and with great effort. His world narrowed to forcing breaths and listening to his heart, thudding miserably in his chest.

Why did he keep the letter? The thought came to him bitterly, selfishly. *Why did I ever have to find out?*

Severus repackaged the contents as carefully as he could with trembling hands. Then he walked downstairs and lowered himself onto a sofa in the sitting room, straining to make sense of anything.

What was the worst part of it all? Surely it was betraying James, trying to sacrifice his wife and child. The rest was still awful. Peter - what had happened with Peter? Had Sirius killed the dozen Muggles after all?

He'd lied to Severus. Blamed him for the death of the Potters when he'd tried to protect them. Guilted him for not going to Azkaban as though Severus was the only one that deserved to.

As he sat, Severus tried to stifle everything with his Occlumency. Each time he approached a thought to stuff it away, it became slippery and impossible to hold. He watched as emotion after emotion slithered out of his grasp, swirling back into his general consciousness.

The bang of the front door jolted him out of his meditative state. Severus opened his eyes, face as blank as he could make it, and watched the Order members stream inside. Kingsley, Remus, Tonks, a handful of Weasleys, and there, bringing up the rear, stood Sirius, grinning openly at him. They were a battered group, bruised and bloody and Tonks appeared singed, but full of jubilant energy.

"It worked," Remus informed Severus. "We have a few injured; they're at St. Mungo's. Voldemort fled but all the Death Eaters were captured or killed."

"Fantastic." Severus knew he sounded wooden, impassive. He couldn't risk injecting any emotion into his words.

No one noticed. They were too flushed with their success. They moved to the kitchen and Severus followed out of habit. Bottles of wine and whiskey were opened and soon the laughter and conversation reached a fever pitch.

Sirius caught his eye and Severus, desperate to avoid any contact with him, stood.

"I need to get back to Hogwarts," he announced to a chorus of boos, followed by a round of goodbyes. Tonks, clutching two shots in one hand, even caught him in an exuberant hug.

Severus Apparated, walked through Hogsmeade, and returned to the castle on autopilot. One minute he was landing neatly on his feet at the Apparition point by the woods and the next he was in his quarters. He opened the cupboard that held the Pensieve and pulled it out. He pressed his wand to his temple, withdrew a silvery strand, and deposited it into the basin before bending his head into the liquid.

In the memory, he watched Sirius suggest they should leave Peter behind. He stood by Peter and watched their group racing away. The Dementors were smoothly closing the gap until the hooded crowd paused by his prone form.

Severus hadn't seen it up close the first time. His stomach twisted as Peter's eyes fluttered open. He was disoriented for only a moment before fear seared into his features. A single Dementor stepped forward and lowered their hood with gnarled scaly hands. Peter's mouth opened in a scream as the Dementor descended upon him.

Severus rewatched the memory. Maybe it was only because he was looking for something but when he stood next to Sirius as the Dementors descended on Peter, he was sure he saw a grim, satisfied smile flash across his face.

Chapter 16

June 1997

The boat thumped gently against the dock as Severus stepped out. His legs wobbled from unfamiliarity with sea travel and behind him Anu Patel had the same trouble, nearly losing his footing, one foot hovering dangerously close to plunging into the sea.

“The Dementors have gone,” Anu explained as they walked up to Azkaban. Their feet plodded loudly against the wooden boards, cracking into the silence. “It will be Aurors at all the posts. You’re only the third visitor they’ve had so don’t be concerned if they’re a bit jumpy.”

It was a dull, misty day. Gray clouds filled the sky, steadily blocking any sunlight valiantly attempting to shine through.

Inside the prison was equally as gloomy. The corridors were as expansive as Hogwart’s but dimly lit by sparsely placed sconces. The two Aurors instructed them to walk ahead, calling out directions as they approached intersections, and Severus was fairly sure they both had their wands trained on his back.

After going up two flights of stone stairs, the Aurors pointed them to a small room that contained a table with two rickety chairs on opposite sides. One had chains; Severus carefully sat in the other.

Anu spent a few minutes gathering assurances from the Aurors that the conversation would be entirely confidential between the visitor and prisoner. Then all three left him alone in the room.

When the Aurors returned, they carried Bellatrix Lestrange between them, her limbs locked but face alert. As they transferred her to the chair, the chains sprang to life and wrapped around her. It was unnecessary as she sat stiffly, magicked immobile.

“Severus Snape,” she said as the Aurors slipped out and left them alone. “When they said I had a visitor I certainly wasn’t expecting you.” Her eyes raked over him and then she was hissing. “You betrayed our Lord. If I wasn’t tied down-”

“What happened with Sirius Black and the Fidelius Charm?” Severus interrupted. He had no time for her drivel.

It had taken a year to arrive at that moment - a year of pretending he didn’t know what Sirius had done. At least all his spying had prepared him for that. The more weeks and then months passed, the easier it was for him to doubt the existence of the letter at all.

Then Albus and Harry had quietly destroyed all of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes, and Harry had gone to die but come back to life. Severus knew none of it until it was over and he was thankful for that. One more monstrous secret might have been his complete undoing.

Now the wizarding world was returning to normal, Azkaban was reforming, and Severus became obsessed with Sirius’s secret. It hadn’t taken long to decide he needed to talk to Bellatrix. He hoped she’d have a different answer, as if there was any other conclusion than the one he’d drawn. But he needed all the details before he made his final decision and he planned to get them from the woman opposite him.

Bellatrix looked thrown for a moment; her expression clouded and her lips pressed together until

they almost disappeared. Then a sudden smile appeared, little more than a vicious bearing of teeth.

"I'll tell you. Pass it on to your band of filth for me. Maybe my cousin can be in here with me again."

"He wrote to me and said he'd reveal the location of the Potters if the Dark Lord agreed to spare the blood traitor. We met at a family home abroad, he gave me a slip of paper which I passed to the Dark Lord, and boom - no more Potters."

"Why didn't he spare James?"

"Why would he have?" Bellatrix scoffed. "Does it make any sense to leave a father alive to avenge his wife and child? Why Sirius ever believed his little deal would be honored is beyond me."

Severus thought of Sirius those many years ago, sobbing into his neck in fear of James's life. Severus knew it didn't matter whether he'd believed it or not - he'd have taken any chance to save the man he'd always put first.

"What about Peter Pettigrew?" Severus asked. "All the Muggles?"

"I've no idea," Bellatrix answered carelessly and then a touch of doubt came to her face. "Oh, I do recall asking him what he would do when everyone knew he'd given his friends over. He told me he had a plan. If I'd known it was to blow up twelve Muggles, I would have offered to help."

"I've answered your questions," she continued. "Now answer mine. Why did you come all this way to talk to little ol' me about Sirius Black?"

Severus regarded her for a long moment. Her eyes were narrowed and eager. He was sure if she wasn't stunned and chained she'd be leaning forward, hands splayed on the table.

"I found a letter you wrote him," Severus said. "I wanted to know more and I, obviously, couldn't ask him."

She looked dissatisfied with his answer but before she could press him, he stood and crossed the room to open the door.

Anu fell into step beside him in the corridor, the Aurors trailing behind once again.

"How was it?" Anu asked.

Severus watched the sconce's shadows flickering on the wall as he answered, "Exactly what I'd expected."

August 1997

The public cemetery was poorly kept. Overgrown weeds concealed rows of flimsy placards; the pathway was long obscured under wild fauna.

Still Severus found his mother easily and, with a quick glance around, pulled his wand out to cut away the tangled growth.

Eileen Snape flickered against the yellowed sign, nearly entirely weathered away by the years of neglect. He lowered himself to the ground before the marker.

"Ma," Severus started but fell silent when no other words came. He wished for a moment to be a

child again, in her arms on her lap, feeling safe and content in a way he never had since adolescence. He chose to believe she would have accepted his sexuality eventually and advised him in this total mess he'd found himself.

Severus turned sharply at the sound of a twig cracking behind him. Sirius sent him a tentative smile and sat down at his side. He pulled Severus's hand into his lap, holding it between both of his.

"She was a good woman," Sirius said gently. "She raised a good man."

Did she? Severus wanted to ask, but couldn't because he was so deeply entrenched in hiding things from Sirius. It was all that they really had, secrets and lies and falsities, and Sirius didn't even know the extent of it.

Sitting there, with Sirius's concerned gaze trained on him, Severus knew there was more to them. It was what kept him tied to Sirius through the decades, through horrible decisions and tragedy and now -

"How did you know I was here?" Severus asked.

"Followed you, of course." Sirius's eyes trailed over to Eileen's name. "Is this what's been bothering you lately? And don't tell me you're fine, I've been hearing that lie for months."

Severus had never been more conflicted and it was all Sirius's fault - the way he spoke so gently now, touched Severus whenever he wanted no matter who was watching; he was thoughtful and compassionate although, of course, still an arrogant berk as it pleased him.

If he hadn't found the letter, he would be totally convinced of Sirius's transformation, utterly devoted to finally having him exactly as Severus wanted.

Was twelve years of torture in solitude enough of a punishment for the betrayal? What if he had killed the Muggles as part of a desperate attempt to hide his actions? Was one year in Azkaban per life equal?

"You're doing that thing again," Sirius said, "when you go all blank because you don't want to seem upset, which means you actually are upset."

"You know me so well," Severus murmured and continued, in his head, *and I know you better than anyone.*

"You aren't going to tell me, are you?" Sirius asked with a note of defeat.

Severus wanted to. Sometimes it was all he could do to stop himself from blurting out what he learned. He'd demand answers, he'd ask all the questions that swirled inside him for the past year. He'd find out about the Muggles.

He was scared of doing that. He'd survived being a spy through two wars and he was still afraid of pushing Sirius too far and making him walk away for good.

Severus wasn't ready to give it all up, even knowing what he did. He was upset but who could comfort him better than Sirius? What touch could possibly compare? Sirius was practically a part of him after so long. Severus didn't want to lose that.

"No," he answered after a lengthy pause.

"Fair enough," Sirius said, though he looked disappointed with the answer. "Want to get lunch?"

They stood and left the cemetery together. They had lunch in the deli at Garrison Grocery & More. Mr. Garrison stumped out from his office to tell Severus how his granddaughter bought him a computer for his office and he had no idea how to use it.

It was nice. In fact, if Severus could push away what Sirius had done, it was perfect.

October 1997 - Harry's Seventh Year

Severus went back to teaching because it was all he knew. He'd grown to enjoy it and especially so when there was no looming threat of war.

His days were busy but he felt empty at night, alone in his room, tossing the decision he needed to make back and forth. Sirius wrote and floo-called and met him in Hogsmeade and those were the moments Severus felt most himself.

One afternoon he went to the bathroom in his quarters and stared in the mirror. He looked at his own face so rarely that he barely recognized it. Stubble dotted his pale jawline, which was starting to soften with age. Wrinkles pressed into the corners of his eyes and across his forehead. His nose looked more offensive than ever, dominating his face. It didn't help that his lips were too thin to offer any sort of balance.

When he looked at himself, he remembered the child he used to be. Terrified of Tobias, meek and sensitive, curious and demanding, and lonely. Meeting Sirius was the first time he'd ever expected more out of life. He'd lived off plans for their time at Hogwarts, even if none of them ever bared out.

He remembered the surly teenager he'd been and wished he could go back and hex the idiocy out of him. So short-tempered, so selfish, so desperate to belong no matter how much that required denying his true self. He'd done it with the Slytherins and Sirius and even his professors. He'd only been his true self with Lily, and she'd rightly rejected the horrible person she saw inside.

He remembered being a young adult at the end of the first war, nearly broken beyond repair. Slowly he'd found his feet teaching, becoming friends with the professors that had practically raised him, relying on Albus to keep him afloat more than he probably should have. He'd been adrift without Sirius.

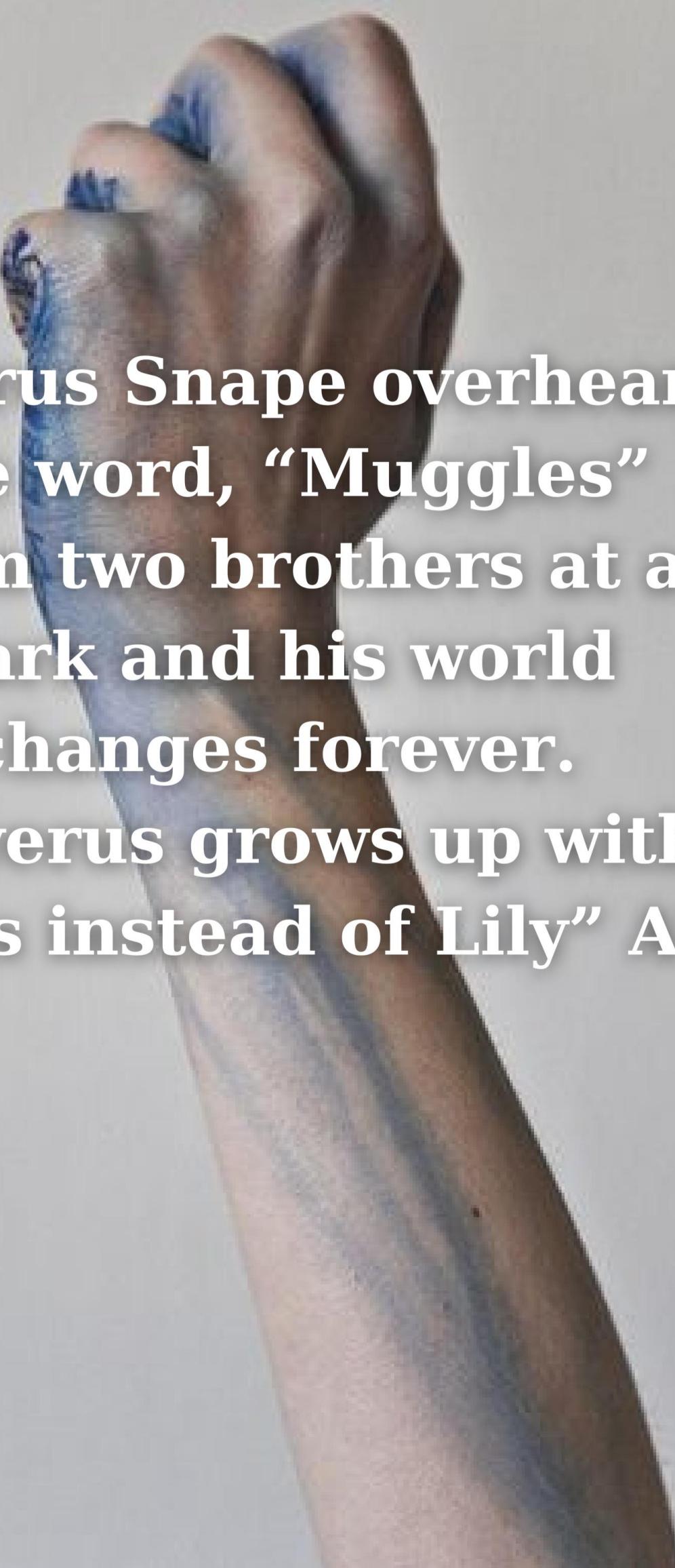
Then there he was now. The man staring back with a blank expression. Free of servitude to the Dark Lord, holding a position in a career he enjoyed, having all of the attention he could ever want from Sirius.

There was only one thing standing in his way.

Severus carefully pulled forward the memory of going into Sirius's room and finding the box. He focused on every detail, the look of Sirius's wardrobe and the stolen Snitch and the tear-stained letter. He wrapped it all up in one neat package before doing the same to his visit to Azkaban, confirming the truth from Bellatrix as she sat in chains.

Severus kept those memories in mind and lifted his wand, pressing it to his own temple.

"Obliviate."



**Severus Snape overhears
the word, “Muggles”
from two brothers at a
park and his world
changes forever.**

**“Severus grows up with
Sirius instead of Lily” AU**